

# Turning Around Schools: A View From School Leaders as Policy Implementers

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BOSTON COLLEGE

Lynch School of Education

Department of  
Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Professional School Administrator Program (PSAP)

TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS:  
A VIEW FROM SCHOOL LEADERS AS POLICY IMPLEMENTERS

Dissertation in practice

By

JILL S. GEISER

with Jamie B. Chisum, Anna C. Cross, and  
Charles A. Grandson IV

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
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# **TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS: A VIEW FROM SCHOOL LEADERS AS POLICY IMPLEMENTERS**

by

Jill S. Geiser

Dr. Rebecca Lowenhaupt, dissertation chair

## **Abstract**

This single case study examines how stakeholders of a local education agency (LEA) understand and implement state turnaround policy for its chronically underperforming schools. While there is ample research on how to improve chronically underperforming schools, that research becomes limited when looking at turnaround implementation actions that are in response to policy mandates. This qualitative study uses the theory frame of policy sense-making to identify how implementers come to understand turnaround policy and to explore how that sense-making impacts their implementation decisions.

Focusing on school leaders as turnaround policy implementers, this research considers how school leaders come to understand their work of turning around a chronically underperforming school in the context of responding to policy mandates. Research findings, which emerged from Interviews, observations, and policy analysis, reveal that school leaders in this LEA are engaged in sense-making of turnaround policy and practice, which informs their decisions about how to implement turnaround. School leaders begin by asking questions about the policy requirements which center on decisions about how to organize staff and utilize resources. Yet, findings show that their sense-making goes beyond policy requirements to other areas of turnaround work. Namely, they also make sense of the data, which plays a prevalent role

in turnaround in that it informs how school leaders diagnose the school's strengths and weaknesses. School leaders then consider the leadership practices that would effectively raise achievement in the school. Findings also show that how school leaders make sense of these areas is influenced by their communication with other stakeholders, their background knowledge and experience in turnaround, and the context of the school. These findings lead to the recommendations to increase communication that focuses on facilitation of sense-making, to communicate a transparent process about how decisions about resource distribution are made across the LEA, to build capacity around data analysis throughout the LEA, and to communicate a vision of turnaround leadership for the LEA.

# TURNING AROUND SCHOOLS: A VIEW FROM POLICY IMPLEMENTERS



A single case study which examines how turnaround policy implementation is influenced by policy sense-making

Executive Summary

Dissertation in Practice

Boston College

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**Research conducted and report produced in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.**

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## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Improving chronically underperforming schools, has been identified as one of the nation's top priorities. Reforming schools has required not only a significant investment of federal, state and community tax dollars but has also served as a lightning rod for issues of accountability and equity for underserved students. The successful implementation of education reform policies leading to “turning around” schools or the entire Local Education Agency (LEA) can significantly influence student lives.

Raising student achievement is the goal of education reform policy implementation, but implementing school reform policy, is a complex and multi-layered endeavor that involves multiple stakeholders. As the consequences for failing to meet state driven accountability measures increases, it is critical that LEA leaders and communities understand how to navigate successfully from policy intent to policy implementation in the local context. Data from this study can inform leaders as to where potential gaps exist and how to develop strategies to accomplish the stated goals.

This research examined how multiple stakeholder groups in a LEA viewed their roles in the implementation of turnaround policies. Additionally, the research examined what factors influenced policy implementer understanding. The implementer groups studied included; school board members, superintendent/central office personnel, building leaders and teachers.

The LEA in this study is a semi-urban school system serving ten-thousand students who represent an increasingly diverse population. The community is challenged by high unemployment, poverty, limited local financial resources to support education and a LEA that is precariously balanced between maintaining local control of its schools or risk takeover by a state entity. During the time of this study, the LEA was engaged in an aggressive campaign to turnaround its most recently designated underperforming schools and was



under state mandate to address the growing student achievement gap. The LEA had successfully turned around two of its schools in the last year and was about to embark on a planning process to develop a strategy for turning around another underperforming school.

LEA leadership had identified a few important strategies that it felt were needed to turnaround a failing school based on previous turnaround experiences. Many of those strategies had been implemented after the school had been designated by the state as underperforming. The superintendent/central office staff, teachers, school leaders and school board members each had policy roles in turning around schools in the LEA. Through interviews, document analysis, and observations of meetings these interwoven studies examined how each implementer group understood their role and whether their understanding ultimately affected implementation of the policy itself.

The study focused the initial research on four key areas. It first examined the current legislation and the process for designating underperforming schools. Then the study examined research on the characteristics of underperforming schools and effective turnaround practices. Researchers reviewed the current literature on policy implementation and identified sense-making as a theoretical lens and finally, reviewed the literature for internal and external factors that might affect policy sense-making. As the researchers assessed and analyzed the study data, several ideas began to emerge. Factors such as role definition, data, communication, resources, context, culture, trust, social and political capital all contribute to how implementers go about the business of making sense of what they are being asked to do. The results of this study are intended to offer guidance and recommendations to the LEA and community leaders who are responsible for implementing turnaround policies. This study is also intended to add to the theoretical and practical research literature on how

turnaround policies are implemented in the local context and what factors influence local implementers.

## **RESEARCH**

### **SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS, POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND SENSE MAKING**

In reviewing the literature, researchers explored the intersection between chronically underperforming schools, turnaround policy intent, policy implementation and the overarching factors that influence implementers as they create meaning in turnaround situations.

The researchers began by looking at the literature that examines how turnaround schools are defined by Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahn & Tallant (2010) and then related it to the work of Murphy & Meyers (2008) Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, Levy & Saunders, (2008), Corallo & McDonald (2001), Gezi (1990) and Clubine, Knight, Schnieider & Smith (2001) on the challenging conditions that contribute to chronically underperforming schools such as poverty, stress, student mobility, low parent involvement and poor home-school collaborations. The strengths or weaknesses of leadership, teacher quality and teacher morale were also cited as factors in chronically underperforming schools. To examine these concepts further, researchers reviewed the work of Fullan (2006), Hargreaves (2004), Leithwood et al., (2010) Murphy & Meyers (2008) and McQuillan & Salomon-Fernandez (2008).

Turning around schools requires knowing not only what contributes negatively to underperforming schools but also identifying the conditions that contribute positively to creating an effective school environment. The research of Mintrop (2004), and Bryk et.al, (2010) speaks to the importance of shared vision, goals and shared values as one way in which to improve schools.

The purpose of our research was to examine how specific state legislation, which outlines policy requirements for school turnaround, is put into practice by

identified implementers. To understand the theoretical framework behind policy implementation research we turned to a review of the work of researchers who argue that successful policy implementation of systemic reform is complex and may be influenced by the politics of the policy adoption, how the policy problem is framed and even the language and symbols used to communicate the intent of the policy (Hess, 1999; Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; Hill, 2006, Smylie & Evans, 2006). To provide a theoretical construct for understanding how individual policy implementers understand and interpret policies and their intended meaning, what the study will define as "sense-making," the researchers referred to the work of Weick (1995) and Honig et. al, (2006).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research examined how turnaround work is implemented according to the state turnaround legislation. Looking at the research questions through a single case study design, the research team was able to gain a deeper understanding of how each stakeholder group made sense of the turnaround policy and how that sense-making influenced their decisions and actions around policy implementation. The LEA selected was one that had already been engaged in the process of implementing turnaround policy, with at least one level D school in the LEA, and with participation in the turnaround work by the four implementer groups that were the focus of this study, school board, superintendent/central office, school leadership and teachers. In this LEA, there are total of 16 schools (with one school closed in spring 2013). In addition to the one high school, there are nine elementary schools, three middle schools, one pre-K through grade 7 school, one therapeutic high school, and one therapeutic middle school. The LEA is considered a Level D district by the state, a designation that resulted from one or more schools in the LEA failing to meet student achievement goals relative to student performance on the state

assessment system. Presently there are four level A schools, one level B school, seven level C schools and one level D school.

Once the LEA was selected, the research team utilized several data collection tools in order to have multiple sources of data and use triangulation in our analysis (Yin, 2009). These included observations, document review, and interviews. Participants were selected purposefully for interviews based on their participation in turnaround policy implementation (Creswell, 2012). Teachers came from level D schools and school leaders came from level C as well as level D schools. Participants also included the superintendent, central office personnel and school board members. This participant sampling allowed the research team to gather data from each of the four implementer groups.

Once data was collected, the team coded and analyzed to look for themes. Using Dedoose coding software, the team coded the interviews, both collaboratively, for the purposes of calibration, and individually (Hill, et. al, 1997). Codes were modified as part of the coding process and as suggested by the data. From there, each of the research team members identified the major themes for their implementer group. That was followed by an analysis of the themes across the implementer groups that led to recommendations for the district. Below summarizes these themes and recommendations.

## **FINDINGS**

### **SCHOOL LEADERS**

The findings in this study show that there are influences on school leaders' sense-making and that this sense-making occurs primarily around three areas, policy requirements, diagnosis, and effective practice. This sense-making then leads school leaders to exercise specific strategies and leadership moves when they take on the tasks of turning around a chronically underperforming school.

Sense-making begins with the elements that influence school leaders' understanding of the turnaround policy and process. There were three primary influences on sense-making, which led to implementation decisions: 1) previous experience, which generated background knowledge around school turnaround, 2) communication with other stakeholders and implementers, and 3) consideration of school context all factored into how school leaders understood the policy. Each one of these influences impacted specific areas of sense-making.

Table 1: The Relationship Between Sense-making Influences and Areas and Implementation Decisions

Influences on Sense-making	Areas of Sense-making	Implementation Decisions
Communication →	Policy Requirements [1. What does the policy say about staffing and resources?]	→ Organize Staff Utilize Resources
Communication → School Context	Diagnosis [2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the school?]	→ Use Data to Diagnose
Communication → Background Knowledge	Effective Practices [3. What practice will leverage strengths and address weaknesses?]	→ Focus on Instruction Communicate a Vision Build Capacity

Working in tandem with each other, these three influences shaped how school leaders thought about their current turnaround situation. Context had a role in the diagnosis of the school. Previous experience had a role in decisions about practices that would be effective in targeting the needs of the school. Communication was the one influence that impacted all areas of sense-making as school leaders were able to hear input from other stakeholders and

implementers. Table 1 shows the relationship between the influences on sense-making, the areas of sense-making and the implementation decisions. With each of the areas of sense-making there were key questions that school leaders asked. This table depicts the questions in a certain order. While there is not necessarily a clean division between each of these questions in terms of their order, generally, school leaders asked about the policy requirements early on in the process. Questions about the school's strengths and weaknesses then quickly followed. Once diagnosis was underway, they then began to look at the effective practices for turnaround implementation. These then led to a range of implementation decisions and actions.

These implementation actions aligned with specific areas of sense-making. From the questions about policy requirements came decisions about how to organize staff and utilize resources. Staffing decisions occurred relative to the staffing authority afforded by the regulations to move staff in and out of the building. Yet, school leaders that did not have that authority, often looked to reorganizing positions or repositioning staff members to put people in places that would maximize their strengths. Similarly, decisions about how to use resources were made based on what became available through level D designation. School leaders who received additional funding, used it to implement programs such as ELT and wraparound. However, schools that did not have additional funding focused their school improvement on the practices that could be implemented despite a dearth of resources. In this way, resources were not only a question of what is available, but also about how best to use what is there.

The process of diagnosing the school for its strengths and weaknesses led school leaders to make data use a critical part of turnaround. In fact, the prevalence of data in sense-making and implementation of turnaround is notable. It was at the crux of school diagnosis, it helped school leaders explain to their staffs the criteria of designation as outlined in the policy, and it became

a significant part of implementation as school leaders put data at the forefront of teaching and learning in their buildings. Data was a driving force in efforts to improve schools in this LEA as it guided how implementers changed their practice, and elements of sense-making and implementation stemmed from how school leaders interpreted the data.

Finally, questions about what practices would effectively move the school forward led to implementation decisions to focus on instruction, communicate a vision, and build capacity. These actions stemmed from two key areas: diagnosis of the school and background knowledge. The diagnosis highlighted the areas on which to focus improvements and to identify practices to target those areas. Background knowledge was applicable particularly where school leaders had turnaround experience. They often entered into new turnaround situations already with a body of knowledge about effective practices from which to draw. In this LEA, the school leaders saw that these three implementation actions, focusing on instruction, communicating a vision and building capacity, would prove to be effective in raising student achievement in their schools.

The influences of communication, background knowledge, and context had key roles in how school leaders made sense of their turnaround work. They shaped how school leaders viewed their schools, how they understood what the turnaround work would entail, and how they decided the steps needed to develop a school that is a place that facilitates learning among its students. For school leaders approaching turnaround work, they should leverage these influences to push their thinking around diagnosing and identifying effective ways to raise school performance.

## **TEACHERS**

Findings in the teacher study not only fit nicely with the literature written about turnaround work in general, but went further and drilled into those

general findings to provide much more specific recommendations for practitioners.

The first finding from the literature had to do with the importance of creating a shared vision at the school needing turnaround. Teachers are the most important resource in turnaround (Murphy & Meyers, 2008) and the most important thing a school leader needs to do with all the teachers and other administrators in their building is to clearly articulate a shared vision of how the turnaround will happen. Successful leaders in low-performing schools drive the work at hand by communicating and maintaining a highly focused vision and mission that is about student learning (Clubine, et al., 2001; Duke, 2006; Gezi, 1990; Jacobson, Johnson, Ylmaki, & Giles, 2005; Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002; Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002; Salmonowicz, 2009; Duke et al., 2005). The finding of this particular study showed that for teachers it was very clear that this vision had to come from the building principal, it needed to come at the very beginning of the turnaround process and it very likely needed to happen with the help of involuntarily transferring teachers who were not on board with the vision out of the building.

The creation of a shared vision by changing the staff of a building until all the teachers were on board with the principal was a very precise description from the teachers of the first step in the turnaround process at both the turned around school and the newly designated one. This first step was necessarily described by teachers from both schools and members of the central office as being directive in nature. They talked with great passion and detail about the reassignment process as a part of getting the staff in place that could and would do the work leaders saw as necessary for turnaround. At the turned around school, teachers described the principal of the beginning stage of turnaround as “her way or the highway” and went on to say that if people



didn't do what that principal said she would make their life a "living hell" until they either did change or left. Another teacher described a second principal she had worked for at another turnaround elementary school in the city as someone who, "... got what she want(ed) by throwing keys in meetings, slamming books against the wall, flipping over chairs." Two of the three turnaround principals referenced in this study were described as having this type of intimidating and strict control at the start of the process. There was no distribution of leadership during this stage of the process.

A second stage of the turnaround process for the teachers of these schools also fits with one of the second recommendations that came out of the literature review that centered on the building of teacher capacity through professional development. Richard Elmore's famous "reciprocity of accountability," which asserts that teachers need to be provided with additional capacity if schools expect them to perform different tasks or familiar tasks at a higher level (Elmore, 2004). Teachers at both these schools stressed the importance of their professional development. The researcher defined this from their comments as internal professional development they got from each other through all of their school, grade, and department meetings as well as other informal conversations they had with colleagues at lunch, during their prep periods, and even in out of work settings. This was also defined as the external professional development they got from outside presenters on topics ranging from "guided discipline" to changing the tone of their school to data training that helped them develop skills to improve their students' learning based on findings in their assessments. They specifically identified training on how to use data to improve instruction as necessary to move their schools forward and this matches with much of the literature as well (Clubine et al., 2001; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Stein, 2012). Teachers at these schools both identified extended learning time as necessary to be able to engage in both kinds of professional growth. It is in this second stage of

turnaround as this study defined it that teachers understand their practices have changed and in the turned around school it is where they saw student growth through data on internal and external assessments.

A second finding from the literature had to do with the importance of teacher voice in the turnaround process. Creating a culture where leadership can be shared makes the job doable for the principal, but also makes the work more meaningful for the rest of the people being asked to do it. "Sustainable leadership spreads. It sustains as well as depends upon the leadership of others" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). The finding of this study is that teachers in these schools did not recognize they had any leadership role in the turnaround process until the principal was certain the shared vision for the school had been clearly articulated. The teachers in this study thought it necessary for teacher voice to come after the right people were put into place, and the vision of the principal specifically had been clearly articulated as the vision for turning around the school.

The third stage of the turnaround continuum for these teachers is rooted in a fear about the sustainability of their improvement. This was true of both the turned around school who was currently in the third stage and the newly designated school that was concerned about what would happen if they ever made it to the stage where their data had improved. Teachers described to me a fear that they could lose valuable resources of time, money, and even motivation when the watchful eye of the state and its' grant funds disappeared as result of the school's improved designation. In the interview done with two teachers from the turnaround school they described their fear this way:

But how are you going to sustain it? ...We still have wellness but the grant was cut this year. Our professional development was already cut this year. We had separate math and science days in the summer and that was totally cut. Most teachers still participated but it wasn't paid and they didn't have the regular consultants that we usually do come in. Look

at the amount of PD we had this year versus last, all these years, beyond already taken away.

These were two of the most positive teachers we interviewed in terms of being proud of what they and their school had been able to accomplish. They spoke passionately about how well the teachers there worked together and how advanced they felt when talking to teachers from other places because they had had so much professional development. Yet they still had this fear about how they were possibly going to be able to sustain this same improvement they were so proud of.

Where the researcher found hope for sustainability in this study had to do with the relational trust that was established at the turned around schools. The creation of this culture of trust happened over time when teachers worked together with the common goal of improving their students' achievement. Here teachers described how they sustained each other when they were having bad days, how they could go into each other's classrooms looking for ideas or inspiration and even how they became so close they went on vacations together and attended each other's weddings. The fear for turnaround schools is that the policy will overtake the people when it comes to focusing on what is important to do in this work. "If truth is the first casualty of war, then trust is the first fatality of imposed reform" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 212). The fact that trust was not dead at the turned around school may be one of their greatest successes and their hope for sustaining their improvement.

## **SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**

The focus of this study was to examine the role of school boards in turnaround policy implementation. School boards have an important part to play in the implementation of education policy because of their role as democratically elected representatives of the community's voice in determining the education of its children. Because of their legislative authority and because

they are agents of the community's interests, the school board can influence the ways in which policies are implemented (Rice, Delagardelle, Buckton, Jons, Lueders & Vens, 2001; Hess, 2010)

In general, findings in this study indicate that school boards make sense of their roles and responsibilities by responding to internal as well as external factors and influences. First, findings indicated that the role of school boards has become ambiguous and undefined as their historical roles have evolved, state activism has increased and the requirements of education reform legislation and the competing interests of turnaround legislation have become intertwined. Second, when faced with trying to make sense of their roles in turnaround, school board members reverted to the role they most closely identified with and understood best, that of approving budgets and allocating resources. School board sense-making was also influenced by two factors; communication and the role of a dissenting voice.

The first finding indicated that the school board's turnaround role in this LEA was undefined and sometimes misunderstood by board members as well as other policy implementers. School board members were caught between balancing their political roles as elected officials and agents of state policy with their community roles as education advocates and community members. The role of school boards described in turnaround legislation is inconsistent with education reform legislation and contributes to the lack of clarity. For instance, education reform legislation calls for school boards to play an active role in approving policy and establishing goals for the LEA but turnaround legislation limits the role of the school board. In this LEA, an increase in state activism and the superintendent's influence coupled with a decrease in school board authority contributed to the lack of clarity for members trying to make sense of their roles and responsibilities. Opportunities for formal training to help school board members clarify and make sense of their specific role in a turnaround district were limited. While members were aware of their four areas of legislative

responsibility they tended to focus primarily on two; selecting and evaluating the superintendent and setting the budget, both areas where they felt they had the most expertise and influence. District goal setting and policy development and implementation were seen as the work of the administration and building level leaders with the school board as a supporting actor.

As a result of school board members viewing their role in turnaround policy as one of budget and resources members focused on how to acquire and allocate resources, and how to distribute them equitably. They viewed long-term sustainability of turnaround as one of their primary concerns particularly since the district was heavily dependent on outside funding sources. Members viewed relationships, alliances and their understanding of the political landscape as important levers in solving the resource puzzle. In order to prioritize resources school board members relied on the direction and guidance of the superintendent. While limited, members benefited from opportunities to engage in direct contact with front line implementers who could translate the resource needs to board members. Board members used these opportunities to create shared understanding of the resource needs and were then able to use the information to advocate for additional resources from the community.

Board members viewed their resource role in three distinct ways; as *facilitators*, as *bridge builders* and as *navigators*. As facilitators, they brokered internal discussions to help them understand the resource needs, as bridge builders they interpreted and translated the districts needs to the community and as navigators they negotiated their way through the complex budget and finance environment of the city and state to access needed resources for the district.

A number of influencing factors were identified that also contributed to school board turnaround sense-making. Communication with internal and external stakeholders was key. School board members relied on communication from the superintendent as the central conduit for distributing, interpreting,

clarifying and making sense of turnaround policies. The effectiveness of the superintendent's use of data to communicate turnaround information, an influencing factor found with other implementer groups, was viewed as mixed by board members. Members understood the importance of using data to guide their decision making, however they often lacked the background knowledge, training and expertise to use it successfully. Communication from external agents such as the State Education Agency (SEA) was also identified as influencing school board sense-making. Members viewed the intervention of state monitors from diverse perspectives. While members understood that the resources and support that came with state intervention were invaluable to the district, they still viewed themselves as the experts of the local context. As such, they viewed themselves as the community's voice when faced with mandates that conflicted with the values and beliefs of the community.

In addition to communication as an influencing factor in turnaround policy sense-making, the role of a dissenting voice also emerged as a factor. Dissenting voice in this study was viewed as one way to make sense of turnaround policies and requirements. "Sense-making through arguing" as noted by Weick is central to organizational sense-making. In this study school board members functioned as a collective group and made sense of the information before them as part of a social process. Their own beliefs, actions and expectations provided the structure through which sense-making occurred (Weick, 1995). The role of the dissenting voice contributed to sense-making by providing the opportunity for members to challenge each other and argue, what researchers have cited as a natural part of the process of sense-making. By engaging in sense-making through arguing board members clarified strategic ideas, potentially leading to more effective group decision making (Kayes & Kayes, 2012). Constructively engaging rather than suppressing dissenting voices can be an important strategy for strengthening rather than weakening sense-making. Turning around schools calls for creative and new ways of thinking,

suppressing dissent can limit the expression of diverse beliefs, alternative views of the world, and ideas for improvement that may be exactly what is needed to increase student achievement.

As elected officials, school board members answer only to the electorate. They have an important role to play as representatives of the democratic process. Because of this, they may be the only implementers uniquely positioned to contribute to policy sense-making by engaging in debate, dissent and arguing as strategies for clarifying policy intentions and implementation.

### **SUPERINTENDENT/CENTRAL OFFICE**

The superintendent and selected central office administrators within the LEA are often the initial implementers of school and district turnaround policy. This study seeks to understand the role of central office in turnaround policy sense-making by collecting data on the superintendent and central office administrator sense-making and its impact on policy implementation. While recent research on school improvement has focused on school improvement actions and responsibilities of principals and teachers, this study seeks to address the research gap of the essential role of school districts offices in school turnaround and improvement. In seeking to understand how district leaders make sense of turnaround policy implementation to support school turnaround, the findings revealed the superintendent and central office administrators found strong superintendent leadership, monitoring and support schools, strategic distribution of resources, and management of human capital as key implementer actions.

The first finding encompassed superintendent leadership and the it's essential role in moving forward turnaround work. Multiple interviewees attributed student achievement gains and therefore successful policy implementation to the superintendent's ability to effectively communicate with the community and build relationships with key stakeholders. The superintendent also established for central office administrators that their purpose is to support

schools, and that they work for schools, schools don't work for them. Additionally, central office administrators, teachers, and principals noted more of a central office presence within their schools and an increased emphasis on teaching and learning during professional development.

This case study also revealed that the LEA's central office staff provided a support, monitoring, and accountability framework for its schools. The school review partner process is created to provide support to the schools principal and teachers and to serve as a thought partner for the school's improvement processes. More frequent and better aligned monitoring of student achievement data and of the effectiveness of instructional initiatives. Additionally, accountability is provided for principals and central office staff to ensure alignment of vision and follow through with instructional initiatives. While these practices are not perfectly and fully embedded within every facet of the district's work, there are key shifts that have taken place alongside the LEA's turnaround, and its turnaround of two chronically underperforming schools.

The third major area of finding is in the realm of access to financial and human resources to support school and system-wide turnaround. The case study LEA has limited resources like most urban districts, and often-times resources are key levers in school and system-wide turnaround. While some implementers, teachers and principals, believed that resource allocation varied across schools, central office implementers viewed resource allocation as equitable. For human resources, the superintendent provided building principals with latitude and control over the management of human capital. The superintendent also provided intentional leadership around making it clear to central office staff and principals that they could either join the district's turnaround philosophy or be asked to leave the district.

Recommendations for school system leaders / practitioners include next steps for various stakeholders within the turnaround process including, school



boards, superintendents, and central office administrators. School boards of urban school districts with turnaround schools should consider the leadership competencies of superintendent candidates look at some of the leadership moves of the superintendent in this case study in developing a profile of their leadership needs. Superintendents have a complex and multi-faceted set of responsibilities and could reflect on their own leadership competencies to ensure successful implementation of turnaround policy. Superintendents also have responsibility for the sense-making of central office administrators to ensure alignment with the organizational vision. Finally, it's recommended that central office administrators touch schools in meaningful ways to ensure support, monitoring, and accountability. The superintendent and select central office administrators within the LEA are often the initial implementers of school and district turnaround policy.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our study looked at sense-making of policy implementation from the perspective of four different implementer groups in a single district's chronically underperforming schools. Examining the four implementer groups, school board, superintendent/central office, school leadership, and teachers, we wanted to understand the role sense-making played in what the implementers actually did and what they thought was effective to improve school performance. The research team looked at the findings of each of the implementers groups and identified recommendations for the LEA around communication, the importance of data, and the use of resources to support turnaround.

### **RECOMMENDATION ONE: INCREASE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN IMPLEMENTERS**

A common theme that emerged from the findings was that there is a need for the turnaround policy to be communicated on a continual basis up

and down the implementer chain. With the understanding that increased communication helps to facilitate sense-making, we looked at how facilitating communication between all parties increased their understanding of what they were being asked to do. We found structures in place in the local education agency for this communication to happen. Specifically, technical communication between and among the implementers was already being done and implementers had a functional understanding of what turnaround was and what the school had to do in order to be successful. While this technical communication was in place, we found that communication that centered implementer sense-making more on their beliefs about their role and expectations rather than merely on the technical requirements of the policy was needed. With the aim to facilitate sense-making, the research team identified three ways to strengthen communication, which focus on better defining the communication that takes place within current communication structures.

The first recommendation is about using the building principal meetings with central office staff to develop a common language around what it means to turn around underperforming schools. Because sense-making around expectations and role was prevalent in the findings, these meetings can include discussion about these two important elements of sense-making. The common language and wisdom gleaned through communication at these principal and central office meetings would also be valuable for the principals of schools who are not yet designated as level D schools. Explicit communication about what has led to turnaround success in other schools would be invaluable for school leaders throughout the district, especially those whose schools are level C. Central Office staff can discuss with building leaders the different scenarios of schools that resulted or did not result in successful school improvement.

The second recommendation around communication is to bring community involvement into the implementation of turnaround through an

extension of the Local Stakeholders Group (LSG). Comprised primarily of community members, school staff, and central office staff, the LSG submits recommendations to the superintendent who uses those recommendations to develop the turnaround plan for the local education agency. The policy does not require further action by the LSG, which means that community participation in the work of turning around the school can be reduced. Here, there is opportunity to extend the role of the LSG to the implementation phase of the turnaround plan, which would increase the engagement and responsibility of the community to contribute to turnaround efforts. One way to do this is through consistent meetings, possibly through the redesign team. Consistent meetings about the progress of the school will help keep everyone informed and would help to facilitate sense-making not only for the educators in the school building and district, but also for the larger school community.

Another recommendation pertains to communication with the school board. The findings reflect a need for the school board to have an opportunity to have more clarification about their expectations and role in turnaround. The school board has four areas of authority: budget, policy, evaluation of the superintendent and collective bargaining. These areas of authority are impacted by the turnaround legislation in that the school board has been grappling with how to make sense of their role in the context of the school district's focus on implementing turnaround policy. More explicit communication among the school board may help their understanding of the significant questions they have about their role and expectations in turnaround. Whether this is done through workshops or other professional development opportunities, the school board may benefit from these conversations that allow them to further their sense-making about what it means to be a school board member of a turnaround district.

A final recommendation about communication would be around paying special attention to the role of collaboration in the turnaround process at all levels. In our study one of our theoretical lenses was the role of social capital in policy implementation. This theory posits that what actually gets implemented depends on who the implementers know and trust. Building trust by improving collaborative working relationships, between and among all implementer levels, through transparent communication will help insure consistency of understanding in terms of what is actually to be implemented in the turnaround process. In authentic collaboration there is room for working with dissenting voices who may in fact have much to offer in terms of improving the work of turnaround along the way.

## **RECOMMENDATION TWO :**

### **SPECIFY A TRANSPARENT PROCESS FOR ALLOCATING RESOURCES**

The findings indicated that implementers have questions about how resources are allocated throughout the LEA. There is confusion about why some schools get certain resources that other schools do not. This recommendation to specify a transparent process for allocating resources intends to alleviate some of this confusion.

As limited resources challenge the LEA, a process needs to define the priorities that guide how resources are distributed to specific programs and schools. By being explicit about these priorities for school improvement, all implementer groups, including school board, superintendent/ central office, principals, and teachers, would have a better understanding of where the resources should go and why. For example, the LEA can clarify their framework for resource allocation based on school level, programming, and student needs. This framework should include details of funding streams for academic programs, extracurricular programs, additional pay for teachers, and other areas essential to effective implementation of turnaround policy. Another

example is to make transparent how staffing is allocated. Staff allocation includes teacher excising if they have not union protection and/or staff “opt-out” which means teachers choosing to transfer to other schools in the city after the new designation. Transparency may involve identifying how teacher “opt-out” of level D schools occurs with the aim to ensure consistency of implementation of “opt-out” across schools.

This recommendation involves assessing the time provisioning of central office administrator’s delivery of support and monitoring across high priority (level D and C) schools. Currently, the perception among some in the LEA is that level D schools receive more support and attention from central office than other schools in the district. Clarifying this LEA’s system to monitor school-level support from central office administrators would ensure clear and equitable support. This would help to assuage the concerns that level D schools receive the most attention and support.

This LEA makes decisions about how resources are allocated to schools and programs across the district. The recommendation here is about making these decisions more transparent. This would help to alleviate confusion about resource allocation and the perception that some schools in the LEA receive more support than others.

### **RECOMMENDATION THREE: DEVELOP THE CAPACITY OF ALL IMPLEMENTERS TO WORK WITH DATA.**

An area that became prevalent in the findings across implementer groups was the use of data. It is apparent that data is at the crux of school improvement efforts as it became one of the most talked-about areas of school improvement by teachers, school leaders, central office personnel, and school board members. Indeed, the LEA has strengths regarding the capacity of implementers to use data where building and LEA leaders, along with numerous

teachers, understand the importance using data and prioritize its role in school improvement. Although data is a significant part of school and LEA improvement planning, findings point to inconsistencies with the level of comfort and ability different implementers have with data analysis. The recommendation here is to increase capacity so that there is more consistency in terms of how implementers understand and use the data. Central office plays a key role in this recommendation in that they would need to set the stage around how to use data in school improvement planning.

One opportunity to build capacity for analyzing data among teachers is to bring them together to share data analysis practices. While teachers interact with other teachers in their own schools, and perhaps informally with teachers in other schools, more formal structures could allow this to occur more prevalently. Giving teachers opportunities to collaborate across schools would increase their contact with other teachers around best practices of data. This could open up new ideas and ways of using data to inform their instruction.

Sharing of best practices can also occur among school leaders. Currently, school leaders meet with central office personnel, along with members of their faculty, to analyze data in their data review meetings. In addition, there are meetings that occur with central office, including the superintendent, and principals of all the schools in the LEA. As school leaders work together to build their own skills around applying data analysis to school improvement, there is opportunity here to look more at how they can lead their staffs through the process. Findings suggest that there is some inconsistency in how school leaders lead their staffs through the process of analyzing data and using that analysis to improve practice. School leaders might benefit from more in-depth conversations around how to effectively lead faculty in conversations about the data.

Another opportunity for building better understanding of the data is with the community of this LEA. This begins with working with school board to promote their sense-making of the data. Findings suggest that school board has little interaction with data and have fewer opportunities than the educators in the schools to analyze the data. Focusing some meetings and/or sessions with school board on looking at the data would help to increase their understanding of and how it informs turnaround. These conversations do not necessarily need to be overly cumbersome in detail. Rather, they might give an overview of what the data is saying about the LEA and why designations occur. This then would put school board members in a position to discuss with their constituencies about the turnaround work that is happening in the LEA. While school board meetings are perhaps likely places for this communication, and indeed discussions around data have occurred there, opportunities offered outside the context of a school board meeting may be beneficial. This may lead to a more informed community about what the data means in terms of their schools' performance.

#### **Recommendation Four: Communicate a clear vision of Leadership for the LEA**

Looking at the findings across the four implementer groups, it became clear that the groups were looking at turnaround differently and focusing on different aspects of the turnaround process. They were expressing different priorities about what needed to be done to improve the schools. There appeared to be a lack of interdependence among the different implementer groups. That is, they tended to operate in silos, distinct from each other, and often not in tune to what other implementers were thinking or doing with the turnaround work.

There were several places where this lack of interdependence was apparent. Central office directors spoke about the importance of their

monitoring role and how they worked with school leaders to put practices in place to improve school performance. Yet, school leaders did not talk much about this and were more focused on how they were working with their staffs. Teachers described a style of leadership in their schools at the beginning phase of turnaround that was directive, whereas, when school leaders described their approach, it resembled more of an instructional leadership approach. The school board was knowledgeable about the responsibilities given to them under education reform but they were less clear on their role in turnaround. The other three implementer groups rarely mentioned the school board, indicating that the school board leadership role was not prevalent in their view. This lack of interdependence may be attributed to the fact that a clear vision from the LEA about what implementers should be thinking and doing to raise school performance was absent. Rather, some implementers were relying on the policy to set their vision for them. That is, upon designation, their vision was about doing what was necessary to exit turnaround status within a specific timeframe. Implementers did not speak about any kind of long-range vision that the LEA established about leading turnaround. LEA leaders did not describe whether they saw the LEA as a system whose parts should be working together towards a common vision or how they envisioned the system supporting learning at the building level.

For this LEA, a clear vision of leadership is needed to help guide and sustain school improvement. When talking about turnaround leadership at the school building level, Leithwood et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of vision when they recommend turnaround leaders engage their staffs in developing the vision of a school as a source of motivation to commit to the work of school turnaround. In implementing this suggestion at the LEA level, this LEA would bring implementer groups more into alignment with each other and with the LEA in terms of how they implement turnaround. Fullan (2006) who also focuses on turnaround leadership at the building level, discusses the need to implement



systemic reform by using a “trilevel development solution” that includes alignment between the state, LEA, and school. Establishing this alignment requires conversation, face to face interactions and the co-construction of meaning that are integral to the sense-making described by researchers (Weick, 1995; Datnow, 2006). In this LEA, the relationships between the district, community and the school is critical where all three work need to work in concert with each other. A vision of leadership would strengthen those relationships and help to create the interdependence needed for implementers of turnaround policy to be working in the same direction. Strengthening the interdependence between implementer groups can also be reinforced by making sure that all voices are represented, including dissenting voices. This common vision would not be about merely exiting or avoiding turnaround status. Rather, it would be about the kinds of educational experiences that leadership would create for students that transcend what the turnaround policy mandates.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research generated insights into what educators in this LEA think and do as they implement turnaround policy. Emerging from these insights are recommendations that are intended to enhance the turnaround work that is already happening across schools in this LEA. Because sense-making relies so heavily on communication, increasing communication is suggested here as a way to facilitate understanding of turnaround policy. Yet, this understanding goes beyond knowing the policy requirements. Communication can help educators in the district better understand their role and expectations, which are not necessarily outlined in the policy. This is the process of co-construction as implementers' communication with each other helps them to make meaning. Also recommended is to specify a transparent process for allocating resources.

This LEA makes decisions about how resources are distributed across schools and programs. Yet, the findings in this research suggest that there is

some confusion as to how those decisions are made. Clarifying these decisions would help to alleviate confusion and increase trust in the process, which can then help to guide implementers' decisions around turnaround implementation. The third recommendation about data use comes from a major theme across the studies about the prevalence of data in school improvement planning and implementation. This LEA already uses data, but there are some inconsistencies in the capacity of implementers to analyze and use data. School leaders, central office personnel, and teachers, would benefit from collaborative opportunities for work with data. School board members may need more experience with data in order to communicate with their constituencies about what the data says about the schools in the LEA. Providing more opportunities for implementers to work with data would not only help with school improvement efforts, but it would also help the community of this LEA to better understand the data that informs turnaround work of their schools.

These recommendations aim to outline how this LEA can increase its capacity to exercise successful turnaround of its chronically underperforming schools. Increased communication can lead to more sense-making, which can help to guide turnaround implementation decisions. More transparency about the way resources are distributed can offer guidance to implementers throughout the LEA about how to approach turnaround work. Increasing capacity to analyze and use data would inform decisions that successfully leads to school improvement. As with most advice about school improvement, this is not offered as a universal remedy to this LEA's turnaround challenges. Rather, it is intended to enhance the thinking that goes into school improvement planning and implementation. That is, these suggestions can help implementers make sound decisions about what they should do when taking on the immense task of turning around a chronically under performing school.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Scott Brinker, and our daughter, Jordan. You encouraged me the whole way through and provided humor when I most needed it. I could not have done this without your support and feel much gratitude to you both for that.

## **Acknowledgments**

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I also would like to thank the educators and community members of the LEA where we conducted our research. Engaging in turnaround work is complex and often challenging and I appreciate the time and openness educators and community members in this LEA gave to us to help us understand their experience implementing turnaround.

Finally, I want to thank my research team, Jamie, Anna, and Charles. I could not have chosen a better team with which to work. You helped me widen my perspective through the insights you offered, which is what true collaboration is all about. To the entire PSAP cohort 2, I thank you for the compelling discussions, the support, the learning, and of course, the laughs. The relationships developed these past three years will remain with us throughout our lives.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>DEDICATION .....</b>	<b>XXXII</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>XXXIII</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES .....</b>	<b>XXXVI</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>CHAPTER TWO .....</b>	<b>6</b>
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	6
<i>Federal and State Regulations and Policies .....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Understanding Turnaround Schools .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Review of Research on Improving Chronically Underperforming Schools .....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>How the literature relates to this study .....</i>	<i>20</i>
THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THE STUDY .....	21
<i>Policy Implementation .....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Policy Sense-making .....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Theoretical Frame Synthesis .....</i>	<i>31</i>
RESEARCH GAP .....	33
<b>CHAPTER 3 .....</b>	<b>35</b>
METHODOLOGY .....	35
<i>The Community Context .....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>The LEA Context .....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Research Design .....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Case Study Design .....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Sampling .....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Data Collection .....</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>Data Analysis .....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Limitations .....</i>	<i>52</i>
<b>CHAPTER 4 .....</b>	<b>58</b>
SCHOOL LEADERS AS IMPLEMENTERS .....	58
<i>Problem Statement .....</i>	<i>58</i>
<i>Prior Research .....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Theoretical Framework .....</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Methodology .....</i>	<i>67</i>
FINDINGS .....	70
<i>Sense-making of Policy Requirements and Its Impact on Implementation .....</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Diagnosis as Sense-making and Its Impact on Implementation .....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Views of Effective Practice in Sense-making and Implementation .....</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Influences on Sense-Making .....</i>	<i>99</i>
<i>How Elements of Sense-making Relate to Implementation Decisions .....</i>	<i>108</i>
DISCUSSION .....	111

<i>The Influences on Sense-making</i> .....	111
<i>Strategy in Implementation</i> .....	114
<i>Limitations</i> .....	122
<b>CHAPTER 5</b> .....	<b>124</b>
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	124
DISCUSSION .....	124
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	125
<i>Recommendation One: Communication Between Implementers</i> .....	125
<i>Recommendation Two: Specify a transparent process for allocating resources</i> .....	133
<i>Recommendation Three: Increase the capacity of implementers to work with data</i> .....	135
<i>Recommendation Four: Communicate a clear vision of leadership for the LEA</i> .....	139
CONCLUSION .....	142
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>145</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>156</b>
APPENDIX A: DEFINITION OF TERMS .....	156
APPENDIX B: LIST OF CODES .....	159
APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW .....	162
APPENDIX D: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....	165
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE .....	167
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCRIPT .....	168
APPENDIX G: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL .....	169

## List of Figures and Tables

---

Figure 1	Theoretical Framework for How Sense-making Impacts Turnaround Policy Implementation.....	31
Figure 2	The Relationship Between Sense-making and Implementation Decisions.....	108

---

Table 1	LEA Demographic Shifts from 2003 to 2013.....	37
Table 2	LEA and State 2012 4-Year Graduation and Drop-Out Rates.....	38
Table 3	2013 LEA Schools and Their Accountability and Assistance Levels.....	39

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## Chapter One

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In writing the introduction to the recently released Equity and Excellence Commission Report, *For Each and Every Child*, co-chairs Christopher Edley Jr. and Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar state the case for why improving and turning around our nation's chronically underperforming schools is critical.

The situation is dire, the agenda urgent. From parent associations to Capitol Hill, from classroom teachers to the White House—there is work to be done and passion to be spent by all of us who appreciate the stakes for our children and for the nation's future. If we fail in this work, we will forfeit our position of economic and moral leadership. We will risk the future of our people and of America as we know it (Equity and Excellence Commission Report, 2013, p.9).

According to the 2012 Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Report on the State of America's Children, 43% of the children living in poverty live in urban settings where the concentration of chronically underperforming schools is the highest. Only 68% of the students who enter 9th grade graduate with a high school diploma. African American and Hispanic males have the most dismal graduation rates of all, just 43% for Black males and 48% for Hispanic males (Orfield, Losen, Wald, Swanson, 2001). Education reform is one of the levers, which can be used to

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anna Carollo Cross, Jamie B. Chisum, Jill S. Geiser, Charles Grandson IV



ensure that every school is equipped to provide a high quality education to every student. We contend that the development and implementation of effective education policy that aligns with education reform goals is one way to increase achievement for all students.

Reforming chronically under-performing schools has been identified as one of the nation's top priorities. In a May 2009 policy speech, Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, articulated his “turnaround” policy initiative and his intent to aggressively move to improve 5000 under-performing schools over five years. In School Year (SY) 2010-2011, the federal government allocated 14.3 billion dollars via state grants and allocations dedicated to school improvement. Reforming schools has required not only a significant investment of tax dollars but has also served as a lightning rod for issues of accountability and equity for all underserved students. The successful implementation of education reform policies can significantly impact student lives. Yet, implementing education reform policy is neither a simple nor linear process.

Some researchers argue that school reform policy has failed to produce any significant change despite the fact that a tremendous number of reform efforts have been attempted (Fullan, 1991; Hess, 1999; Murphy, 2010). Others argue that successful implementation of systemic reform may be affected by the complexity of the policy implementation, the politics of the policy adoption, how the policy problem is framed, and even the language and symbols used to communicate the intent of the policy (Hess, 1999; Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; Hill, 2006 ). The importance of policy and its implementation is the common thread that links researchers and ultimately practitioners in the field, who are held accountable for decreasing gaps in student achievement. Understanding and interpreting policies and their intended meaning, what we will define as “sense-making,” can influence the success or failure of reform initiatives (Honig, 2006; Weick, 1995).

In this state under study, the urgency of understanding how to make sense of and effectively implement reform policies has immediate and real time implications for educators, communities and students. In 2009, the United States Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act which re-authorized funding for the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, outlining specific requirements for chronically underperforming schools. In January 2010, aligning state law to federal regulations, this state passed legislation that outlines the steps and timeline required to raise the performance of chronically under-performing schools, within a 3-year period. These chronically underperforming schools are now known as “turnaround schools.” The overall goal of this policy is to raise the level of school effectiveness so that all students in the school become well prepared for the next level of education. With a three-year window in which schools must show significant progress in student achievement or risk further corrective action, multiple implementer groups including administrators, community members, teachers and parents, each have a significant role to play in developing and implementing plans to increase student achievement.

Educators are called upon regularly to implement federal and locally-designed policies and are then held accountable for demonstrating that the implementation of the policy has yielded positive results. Our assumption is that the implementation of any policy should be aligned with its goals as much as possible and that implementation acts as a bridge between realizing the original intent of the policy and the policy itself. We acknowledge that the implementation of any policy, particularly school reform policy, is a complex and multi-layered endeavor. Therefore, it is critical to understand how reform policy is being implemented and whether there are forces that influence the implementation and realization of the original goals. In the case of turnaround policy, where implementers’ actions are expected to lead to improved

outcomes for students in order to meet the intent of the policy, how they understand what they are being asked to do can make all the difference. With this, we turn to the concept of sense-making.

Sense-making considers how implementers interpret such policy to better understand what leads to implementation decisions. For example, if implementers do not deeply understand or make sense of the policies that are intended to guide the turnaround process, they may misinterpret the policy goals, or they might not understand how it relates to their day-to-day work. They may dismiss it entirely because it does not have an obvious practical application, or worse, they may implement it ineffectively. The chances, therefore, of successful implementation are greatly reduced. If those policies are intended to increase student achievement, and the policy is sabotaged, ignored, or misinterpreted, student access to an equitable and high quality education may be compromised.

While this research focuses specifically on turnaround policy, it may have broader implications about the role of sense-making in the process of turning around a school or an entire local education agency (LEA). This research may unearth insights about how implementer sense-making about policy can lead to school improvement. It may also identify areas of tension or confusion for implementers as they begin to make sense of the policies, and those outside factors that influence their understanding and the importance of who and how policy is communicated. It may also be possible to determine the amount of time and resources each implementer group takes to gain a full understanding of the policy. Sense-making could influence each implementer's view of their own ability to engage in the turnaround process and may shape the decisions they make when faced with the task of turning around a school. It may also affect how the policy translates into the turnaround plan, which outlines specific steps to inform the work of

turning around a school. This study examined the impact of sense-making on policy implementation by focusing on the following research questions:

1. How do various implementers' (superintendent/central office, building leaders, teachers, school board members) make sense of turnaround policy?
2. How does this sense-making influence policy implementation?
3. What factors influence sense-making?

In this single case study, we explored how different implementers in a designated level D district make sense of turnaround policy. We begin by presenting an overview of the current legislation and the process by which schools are designated underperforming. The research literature on the characteristics of chronically underperforming schools and effective practices for turnaround school improvement is discussed (Fullan, 2006; Leithwood, 1994), and we review the current literature on policy implementation and why we chose to view policy implementation through a theoretical frame that builds upon sense-making as a research construct (Weick, 1995). A number of internal and external factors that have been identified through the literature and how they might affect policy sense-making are outlined (Honig, 2006; Malen, 2006; Datnow, 2006). Finally, we present a graphic synthesis of the theoretical frame, which formed the basis for our study followed by a description of the research design and methodology. Four individual studies were conducted that each focused on the unique aspects of the sense-making process in targeted implementer groups: school board members, superintendent/central office, building leaders, and teachers.

## Chapter Two

### Review of the Literature<sup>2</sup>

#### Federal and State Regulations and Policies

**Federal Policy Setting the Stage.** Recent federal and state regulations outline detailed requirements about what schools need to do to raise their level of performance. In January of 2002, the U.S. Congress approved “An Act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind,” colloquially referred to as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). The elongated legislative title makes clear that the goal of the federal policy is to close the achievement gap. The law requires a number of actions from state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEA’s), including hiring highly qualified educators, notifying parents on the quality of their child’s education, and requiring states to adopt challenging academic standards for all students. Perhaps the most important part of the legislation is the requirement that all schools and districts make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is the minimum threshold for improvement schools are required to meet each year. A school that does not achieve AYP for two consecutive years faces the threat of corrective action. The advent of NCLB brought attention to measures of school effectiveness and requirements placed upon schools to perform incrementally or face consequences (Ravitch, 2010).

**Analysis of State Turnaround Policy.** With federal policy as a backdrop, legislation enacted in early 2010 was this state’s interpretation of the NCLB goal to narrow the achievement

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anna Carollo Cross, Jamie B. Chisum, Jill S. Geiser, Charles Grandson IV

gap. The 2010 law addressed chronically underperforming schools by requiring the state education agency (SEA) to designate or level schools within the framework for district accountability and assistance according to student academic performance.<sup>3</sup> Designation of level includes a range of factors, such as exclusion and drop-out rate, but it is based primarily on student performance on the state assessment. Designation comes out of a compilation of data, including the aggregate performance of the school along with the performance of subgroups identified by race and ethnicity (e.g. African American, Hispanic, etc.), learning profile (e.g. students with disabilities, English language learners, etc.) and income levels (e.g. low-income). This is notable because, similar to NCLB, disaggregating the data forces schools to consider the performance of all its students by highlighting how each subgroup is doing academically. Once the data is compiled, the state designates schools based on where they fall relative to the other schools in their grade level span. The lowest 20 percent of schools in a grade level span are classified as level C. A subset of those schools, not more than 4 percent, are deemed eligible for level D status. These are chronically underperforming schools, informally referred to as “turnaround schools.” It is this level D designation that triggers the turnaround process that is outlined in the policy. The turnaround requirements also apply to schools designated level F, and a key element of turnaround for these schools is state takeover. This leveling system is used to determine where state assistance and intervention is most needed.

The process that school districts must undergo upon level D designation, as outlined in the turnaround legislation, includes a series of steps to develop a turnaround plan. This process begins with a local stakeholder group, comprised of members in and outside the school, which

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of maintaining anonymity of local education agencies (LEA) and participants, in this study, we use a pseudonyms for each of the levels.

convenes to develop recommendations for a turnaround plan that is submitted to the superintendent. This part of the policy indicates that the state considers that the community has a role in the turnaround process. However, the policy does not require that stakeholder groups participate in the turnaround process beyond the initial phase of making recommendations. Once recommendations are submitted, the superintendent is responsible for the actual development of the turnaround plan and its implementation. The policy appears to emphasize the role of educators in the work of implementing the turnaround plan and does not require community involvement in the implementation stage.

In addition to outlining the process, the legislation dictates specific areas that need to be addressed in the plan. These include achievement gaps, alternative English language learner programs, financial planning, social service and health needs, child welfare services and law enforcement, and workforce development services. The plan must also include measurable annual goals using a range of data points such as the state assessment system (SAS), student promotion, graduation, student attendance, student discipline, and family engagement. These requirements reflect a view that there is a range of factors that impact student learning beyond what happens in the classroom. The policy requires the school to pay attention to other areas of social and emotional health as well as the relationship between the school and students' families. Schools are also compelled to look at different data points to gain a holistic view of student performance, which is not only about performance on state assessments.

Finally, there are optional components of the plan. These include, but are not limited to, reallocation of the budget, expanded school day or year, alteration of the curriculum, job-embedded professional development, and limiting or changing school district policy. There are other optional elements that may be subject to collective bargaining, one example of which is

requiring all staff to reapply for employment. These elements allow for some flexibility with school structures that are often thought of as inflexible. For example, little flexibility is typically seen with budget and scheduling. These tend to be fixed processes and structures. Yet, this policy acknowledges that chronically underperforming schools may need leeway to adjust school time and budgets in order to reach turnaround goals. Similarly, the policy opens the door for districts to engage in collective bargaining on areas that are viewed as critical to turnaround success, but that need to be agreed upon with the local teachers union.

State legislation outlines the turnaround process that underperforming schools must undergo with the aim to demonstrate higher student achievement within a 3-year period through the implementation of a turnaround plan. This aligns with the federal funding regulation that imposes requirements on LEA's in order to qualify for School Improvement Grants (SIG) and Race to the Top (RTTT) funding. According to that regulation, schools and LEA's need to turn around within 2 to 3 years, as measured by student achievement data. A key requirement is that schools, identified as "turnaround", must implement one of the turnaround models if they want to be considered for a school improvement grant. These models are labeled turnaround, restart, school closure, and transformation (Race to the Top Fund, 2009). When the turnaround plan is developed, and the school improvement grant application is submitted, a turnaround model is chosen. The policy or grant requirements do not state who is responsible for choosing the model. However, since the superintendent is responsible for the development of the plan, as noted earlier, it would stand to reason that the superintendent would likely be a primary voice in the selection of the model. What is notable about these models is that they all require shifts in staffing, whether that is removal of school leadership and/or part of the teaching staff. While these models are not mandated interventions of the legislation, they are prioritized through the



school improvement grant requirements in that they are tied to funding and are not a requirement of the turnaround policy itself. Although this study is not necessarily looking at the role of the model, we acknowledge that implementers' perception of the policy and corresponding turnaround work may be influenced by the requirements of the selected model.

The turnaround policy in the state we studied contains a range of elements that are intended to facilitate successful turnaround of level D and F designated schools. Although the policy does not explicitly articulate the practices educators need to exercise to raise academic performance of their students, its elements suggest that the policy operates on certain assumptions about what conditions would help to support turnaround efforts. Whether that is flexibility in structures, attention to a range of factors in learning, or community involvement, the policy reflects a view that turnaround schools can improve when these elements are addressed. Furthermore, although the policy does not contain language around specific turnaround models to use, the state prioritizes the use of the models by attaching it to the funding that is available to support turnaround efforts. This is important because the turnaround models involve shifts of staffing that could impact how the educators in and around the school view the turnaround work.

### **Understanding Turnaround Schools**

The turnaround policy has a specific view of a turnaround school as a chronically underperforming school as measured by student achievement performance data. Yet, those data points do not reflect the challenging conditions that surround chronically underperforming schools. In order to fully understand turnaround schools, we look beyond the leveling of schools that emerges from low performance on state assessments to the conditions of those schools and

their communities. Chronically underperforming schools share many of the same challenging conditions regardless of whether or not they are labeled a “turnaround school” via the policy. Therefore, we look to the broad range of literature which examines conditions in schools that are considered underperforming, challenging, and/or high-need in order to fully grasp the nature of the work that is involved in turning them around.

One condition that appears to be common in chronically underperforming schools is poverty. The literature reveals that the low socioeconomic status of the school’s population is often identified as a condition of a low-performing school (Duke, Tucker, Belcher, Crews, Harrison-Coleman & Higgins, 2005; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). High levels of poverty often increase the level of stress on a school resulting in a need to provide more services for students (Corallo & McDonald, 2001). In an opinion article in the *New York Times*, Reardon (2013) emphasizes the central role of social and economic status in the success of students in school. He notes in particular that while small gains have been made in closing the achievement gap between racial groups, there continues to be a gap between students of different socioeconomic status, with students living in poverty persistently performing well behind those of their more affluent peers. This means that schools serving high poverty communities often face the challenge of raising the academic performance of their low-income students.

Although the home environment of children living in poverty influences their school performance, the low achievement of poor children is not due solely to family background. Their school experience also plays a critical role in their academic progress (Gezi, 1990). A number of areas that impact student achievement are associated with low-performing schools. Poor teacher quality (Duke et al., 2005; Murphy & Meyers, 2008), high teacher turnover (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Murphy & Meyers, 2008) and ineffective leadership (Murphy & Meyers,

2008) are all associated with a school's inability to effectively show high student achievement. Other school conditions include a lack of teamwork, curriculum that is not aligned, and discipline issues (Duke et al., 2005). Educator practices and beliefs also play a role in low student achievement. Blaming students for failure, which often stems from low morale (Murphy & Meyers, 2008) and low expectations of students (Corallo & McDonald, 2001), are typically found in underperforming schools. From their findings of a study of the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program (VSTSP), which examined the practices of ten successful turnaround leaders, Duke et al. (2005) echo these low expectations by describing the conditions of a dysfunctional culture in which educators assume a punitive and reactionary attitude towards students displaying a lack of achievement. Low parent involvement is also commonly found in underperforming schools where communication and collaboration between school and home is minimal and weak (Clubine, Knight, Schneider, & Smith, 2001). This literature illustrates how turnaround schools operate in challenging contexts. Rather than view these conditions as barriers to school improvement, we feel they need to be taken into account when turning around chronically underperforming schools.

We look to these descriptions of chronically underperforming schools to understand the kinds of conditions that may exist in current turnaround schools designated under current state and Federal legislation. These are schools with weak school structures and practices in communities with high poverty rates. Although all the conditions described above might not apply to all schools labeled a "turnaround school," they are common enough to illustrate some of the challenging conditions that educators face when embarking on the work of turning around underperforming schools.

## **Review of Research on Improving Chronically Underperforming Schools**

Given this characterization of turnaround schools as schools with challenging conditions, we examine the research that highlights the practices that have been successful in improving chronically underperforming schools. Because research on practices for school turnaround in response to policy mandates is lacking, this review is derived from a broad range of research studies of effective practices in underperforming schools, many of which may not necessarily have implemented specific policy requirements for school improvement. It is our belief that the findings from these research studies could aid our understanding of the kinds of practices that educators might draw on when implementing turnaround policy. If the goal of the policy is to raise student achievement and to close the achievement gap, what educators do to meet those ends is paramount, and research on effective practices can potentially inform how they approach the work. These practices have been examined through a variety of lenses, including motivation, professional development, development of teacher leaders, vision and goal-setting, data, instructional time and programming, and collaboration.

**Motivation.** One of these lenses is the role of motivation in the process of change. Albert Bandura (1994) defines motivation as the “activation to action.” He argues that people are able to remain motivated in stressful situations when they believe they have self-efficacy and the ability to overcome their stressors. What school leaders do can influence how educators motivate themselves to do turnaround work. Leaders have to instill hope and confidence in the teachers in order for the work of a turnaround to even be attempted (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). There is a human element to turning around schools and therefore the emotional impact of the reform efforts on teachers must be considered in order for the changes to be successful. The school leader must take into account how it feels for people to go through change in such a stressful

environment (Evans, 1996; Norman, 2010). Motivation is particularly important in light of policy requirements that are imposed on schools from the state. On the one hand, they might contribute to the stress that educators feel. On the other hand, mandates that threaten the elimination of jobs, the closing of schools, and even the public shaming associated with turnaround schools can serve a purpose (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, Levy & Saunders, 2008). The threat of loss of employment and school closure serve to introduce a crisis into the turnaround school, particularly if the teachers there did not feel it already. This is akin to accountability pressure that comes into play when achievement targets must be met in order to show improvement. It is helpful to leverage this accountability pressure to compel educators to focus on their performance (Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, & Giles, 2005; Fullan, 2006). Turnaround work can be fostered by the school leadership, or it can be motivated by policy mandates with consequences for noncompliance. Regardless of the motivation, educators' beliefs about their ability to create sustainable improvement in student achievement are key to turning around an underperforming school.

**Vision and goal setting.** Perhaps the practice most frequently cited for raising school performance centers on vision and mission. Successful leaders in low-performing schools drive the work at hand by communicating and maintaining a highly focused vision and mission that is about student learning (Clubine, et al., 2001; Duke, 2006; Gezi, 1990; Jacobson, et al., 2005; Leithwood, Harris & Strauss, 2010; Murphy, 2010; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Picucci, Brownson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002; Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002; Salmonowicz, 2009; Duke et al., 2005). While the literature has examined this feature in a variety of contexts, it is the one that is primarily noted as having a significant impact on school improvement success. Distinguishing between strategies for short-term versus long-term gains, Corallo and McDonald

(2001) note that developing a common vision and mission is one that would result in long-term gains. Gezi (1990) articulates this critical role of vision when he says, “Leadership seems to infuse the school not only with the vision but with the positive climate, communication and support that are essential ingredients of a sense of ownership, enthusiasm, commitment and pride in achievement” (p. 9).

Similar to establishing a vision, goal setting has a significant role in the work of turning around underperforming schools. Establishing clear goals and priorities is an essential component of raising the level of performance for any underperforming school (Anderson et al., 1999; Gezi, 1990; Leithwood et al., 2010; Murphy, 2010; Stein, 2012) with an emphasis on the use of targets to benchmark progress towards goals (Potter et al., 2002). This points to the importance of objectives and targets in outlining the improvement goals of the school, guided by an overall vision of performance for the school.

**Data.** Working in tandem with goal setting is the use of data. Some of the research notes the value of analyzing student achievement data to guide instruction in low performing schools (Clubine et al., 2001; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Stein, 2012). Leithwood et al. (2010) claim that the leadership practices most associated with successful school turnaround include monitoring of student learning and overall school progress. They write, “School and district leaders constantly monitor evidence about the learning of students and the efforts of staff to improve such learning, continuously adjusting their own decisions and actions in response to this evidence” (p. 159). Indeed, turnaround schools need to engage in a continual process of self-analysis in order to monitor progress and determine areas that persistently lag (Murphy & Meyers, 2008). This reflects how data should be used to ensure progress towards goals already set, not just in individual classrooms, but also school wide, all of which embodies the process of

measuring accountability. The literature illustrates that there is a strong link between goal setting and using data to measure progress for leaders in underperforming schools and that using data has a key role in school improvement.

**Building capacity.** Another key component to improving chronically underperforming schools is in the area of capacity building. The work of M. Bruce King and Kate Bouchard (2011) on building organizational capacity in schools defines capacity as the “collective power of a faculty to strengthen student performance throughout their school” (p. 654). Richard Elmore (2004) addresses the role of professional development in bridging the gap between performance and human capacity. An expert on the modern school reform movement, Elmore argues for a robust and targeted professional development plan in schools that values the idea of “reciprocity of accountability,” which asserts that teachers need to be provided with additional capacity if schools expect them to perform different tasks or familiar tasks at a higher level. Indeed, professional development is a common means used to increase staff skills and knowledge to improve their individual and collective performance. Newmann, King, and Young (2000) further claim that schools that used a comprehensive approach to professional development were more likely to focus on the long-term consistency, improving teacher knowledge over time, thereby building capacity. They add that professional development for principals must ensure they understand the importance of building capacity.

Bringing in external resources is one way to help build capacity. Due to the difficulty of developing capacity in low performing schools, King and Bouchard (2011) provide insight they gained from the Wisconsin Idea Leadership Academy (WILA), a hybrid program that combines the resources of a university school of education, the state education department, a mid-size urban district, and six schools. They note that the success of the WILA model is that it provides

leadership coaching for school leadership teams, instructional coaching for teachers, cross-lateral networks for sharing of best practices between schools, and alignment between WILA coaches and state liaisons. School-university partnerships are key external resources as noted by Vernon-Dotson and Floyd (2012) who found in their research of three K-12 school partnerships with local universities that external technical assistance provided by universities to teacher teams can build capacity in schools. Consistent with past school reform movements, the work of school districts with turnaround schools is to find external resources and service providers to help build capacity in schools engaged in the current turnaround experiment (Fullan, 2006; Zavadsky, 2012). Given the complexity of improving student achievement in turnaround schools, providing quality professional development for teachers is critical to equipping them for the work of school turnaround.

**Teacher leaders.** Another aspect that is addressed in the literature is the importance of sustained improvement, rather than seeking a temporary fix for underperforming schools. One way this improvement is sustained is through the identification and development of teacher leaders who will commit to continuing the work over time to realize student achievement gains. In their research on teacher leadership in the UK, Muijs and Harris (2006) emphasize that being a teacher leader was not limited to leading a department or team, but instead entail having any kind of responsibility for making improvements. They found that teacher leadership is a significant factor in school improvement as it increases teacher professional learning because they are able to learn amongst their peers. In fact, teacher leadership is tied to capacity building as noted by Dinham and Crowther (2011), whose research on building sustainable capacity in schools found that the distributed leadership model and the relationship between principals and teacher leaders is a key factor in building school capacity. Defining what teacher leadership



looks like, Vernon-Dotson and Floyd (2012) claim that when teachers become immersed in tackling school challenges with a leadership lens, they are inspired to go above and beyond their job description and become participants in school-wide change. Furthermore, teachers who engaged in collaborative leadership experiences felt valued and were more likely to buy into school initiatives because they were a part of the decision-making process. As a result, teachers were more likely to implement commonly developed professional development activities and put strategies into action. Spillane and Coldren (2011) further describe distributed leadership in their discussion about diagnosis and design for school improvement when they say that it is not only about the leadership actions, but includes how people communicate in schools and how the situation influences their interactions. By employing distributed leadership, turnaround schools can better maximize their resources by engaging faculty in deeper and more meaningful ways that will help sustain the work.

**Collaboration and teamwork.** Collaboration and teamwork are also areas that research has shown to contribute to successful school improvement. Some studies have found that relationship building, coupled with collaboration between stakeholders, is key to raising the level of performance of an underperforming school (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Fullan, 2006; Harris, 2006; Mulford et al., 2008; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). Clubine et al. (2001) found that in successful turnaround schools, collaboration took several forms, including common team planning where teachers discussed student progress, curriculum, and instructional goals. Indeed, this collaboration has a particular role in school reform in that in successful school turnaround, there is a collective sense of responsibility for student improvement (Anderson et al., 1999). Yet, collaboration does not always naturally occur without guidance. In her examination of change efforts in schools with difficult contexts in England, Harris (2006) emphasizes the

need for a leader to be open and honest as they build quality interpersonal relationships. This lays a critical foundation for teamwork and collaboration. In fact, empowerment and a sense of trust are a critical part of collaboration. Once these are infused into the organization, a collaborative environment can flourish (Fullan, 2006; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris, 2002). Educator collaboration can help educators to feel less isolated and more connected to a common goal of making gains in student learning. In the end, the value of collaboration is its role in supporting educators in the difficult work of school improvement.

**Instructional time and programming.** Another significant part of improving chronically underperforming schools involves focusing on instructional time and examining instructional programming. Studying three high-poverty elementary schools, Jacobson et al. (2007) found that successful principals revamped structures, policies, and procedures where needed and refocused conversations on how to improve student learning. While this applies to the operation of the school overall, what is suggested is that these structures are needed to support the instructional programming. Picucci et al. (2002), in their study of school turnaround, found that schools that showed rapid achievement gains helped to maintain instructional quality by reducing any distractions to teaching. This included strengthening student management systems in order to increase teachers' focus on instruction and less on managing student behaviors. Leithwood et al. (2010) also discussed the need to eliminate distractions, but more in terms of buffering staff from "being pulled in directions incompatible with agreed-on organizational goals" (p. 162). With structures in place to support a focus on teaching and a reduction of distractions, the time for actual planning and delivery of instruction can be maximized.

## **How the literature relates to this study**

Literature on school improvement, particularly for challenging schools, outline specific leadership practices that, when implemented effectively, contribute to the success of school improvement. These practices include attending to staff motivation, building capacity, developing teacher leaders, setting a vision and goals, using data, maximizing instructional time and programming, and providing opportunities for collaboration. While literature has uncovered effective practices to raise school performance, most of the chronically underperforming schools in these research studies have not necessarily been responding to policy mandates of school turnaround. Indeed, new legislation now attempts to improve school performance by imposing general requirements around how turnaround work is to occur. However, the policy does not articulate the practices educators should use to implement it. That is, the policy requirements are about the process of developing the turnaround plan and elements that must be included. It does not include language around how educators should approach the work of school turnaround in order to meet the turnaround goals of raising student achievement. That is left up to the educators to determine what practice would most likely be effective in raising student achievement. That is where this body of research comes in. School leaders might turn to these research studies to understand what practices they should exercise in order to meet the turnaround goals.

The research on practices that improve the performance of chronically underperforming schools is ample. Therefore, the purpose of this research was not to explore best practices for turning around underperforming schools. Rather, we aimed to unearth how turnaround work occurs as a response to policy mandates, in light of these proven effective practices. As discussed earlier, educators are responsible for implementing turnaround policy and the practices described above might inform how they do that, especially given a policy that does not require or even

suggest specific practices. With a policy that does not suggest educational practices for implementers, and a body of research that reveals effective practices in turning around schools, what is missing is research that looks at what practices educators put in place to implement turnaround policy. In order to better understand how these implementation decisions are made, we turned to how educators interpret and make sense of the policy itself. This may have a great impact on the implementation and ultimately on the success or failure of the policy.

### **Theoretical Basis for the Study**

#### **Policy Implementation**

State legislation requires that turnaround plans lead to rapid academic achievement of students. The literature review of best practices outlines what is needed to turn around chronically underperforming schools and policy implementers may use these as guides to know which actions to take. Whereas the policy articulates the goal of higher student achievement, the literature answers the question of what to do to reach that outcome.

The theoretical basis for this research first looks at policy implementation as a critical factor in whether or not practice is aligned with policy goals. Green (1983) provides a theoretical overview for the relationship between policy and practice through his discussion of excellence, equity, and equality. He identifies the problem of determining whether the tools of public policy can impact practice, questioning the nature of public policy and its limitations. He claims that public policy addresses the common good and not the good of individuals, and further argues that the tools of policy are primarily aimed to minimize evil, rather than promote benefits. Green's work is significant to our study because it points to the role of policy implementation in

relation to changing practice. In turnaround schools changing practice is essential to improving student achievement.

The field of policy implementation research formally emerged during the 1960s. Since then it has undergone three distinctive generations or waves of research (Honig, 2006). The first wave focused on what gets implemented. Early research studies looked at policies that were intended to achieve wide ranging societal goals. The second wave, during the 1970s, focused on what gets implemented over time, and included a growing recognition of the fact that policy, people and places mattered to implementation. During the 1980's a third wave of research evolved which centered on concerns with what works and the field began to focus on "implementers' agency as an important avenue for implementation research" (Honig, 2006, p. 9).

Honig (2006) notes that past treatment of policy implementation in research relied on a distinction between "successful" policies, those that result in higher student achievement, and "implementable" policies, those where implementation closely resembles policy design. She further states that research needs to acknowledge that there is significant complexity involved in policy implementation and includes the interaction between policies, people and places, and the demands on implementers. The critical question is about, "what is implementable and what works for whom, where, when and why" (Honig, 2006, p. 2). Included in this complexity are the factors that have a role in what implementers do with policy and the actions they take, which may include their belief systems, background, knowledge, and the contexts that influence what they can and will do (Honig, 2006). The process that individuals or organizations engage in to create "understanding" when faced with complex, dissonant or ambiguous circumstances leads to a more in-depth analysis of the theory base for this study. Here, sense-making may have a significant role in policy implementation in terms of how implementers understand the policy

that dictates turnaround work. This research study looked at how well implementers' understanding of policy supports its execution and if there are influencing factors that impact the way in which implementers make sense of the policy. Understanding the impact of implementer sense-making is not only important and practical for school districts who are engaging in turnaround work in response to policy mandates, but it is also high stakes for the success of students currently attending chronically underperforming schools.

### **Policy Sense-making**

Defining “understanding” requires a further analysis of a body of research, which spans multiple disciplines and multiple interpretations. Prior researchers from the fields of organizational psychology, sociology, management science, social anthropology and more recently education policy implementation have defined this process as “sense-making.” Organizational psychologist Karl Weick (1995), a key contributor to the development of this theoretical frame, stated simply, “The concept of sense-making is well named because, literally it means the making of sense.” Weick (1995) further defined the concept by stating, “how they (individuals) construct what they construct, why and with what effects, are the central questions for people interested in sense-making” (p. 4). Weick (1995) grounds his version of sense-making in seven properties that he argues are most commonly found throughout the sense-making literature, including; 1) grounded identity construction; 2) retrospective; 3) enactive of sensible environments; 4) social; 5) ongoing; 6) focused on and by extracted cues; and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. He argues that each of the seven properties can be used to define various characteristics of sense-making. For example, sense-making begins with the sensemaker (grounded identity construction). An individual’s environment as well as their past

experiences are used in sense-making (retrospective). Individuals can be active participants in constructing the environment they are trying to make sense of (enactive of sensible environments). They can make sense of something either individually, or as part of a larger social group (social). The sense-making process has no beginning and no end (ongoing). It is an iterative process and can be influenced by the cues individuals chose to focus on in the environment around them (focused on and by extracted cues). Finally, sense-making is not about truth or getting it right. It is a about creating a story that is plausible and then continually refining it with more data and observations so that it can withstand criticism (driven by plausibility not accuracy). (Weick, Sutcliff, & Obstfled, 2005).

In addition to Karl Weick, a number of other researchers have provided their own theories and interpretations of sense-making. Dervin (1998), whose research centers on communication and the design of communication systems, uses the sense-making frame to investigate the interconnectedness between knowledge management and sense-making. Dervin states, “One of the premises of sense-making is that there is an inherent intertwined connection between how you look at a situation and what sense of it you are able to construct of it” (p. 11).

The focus of this research was grounded in the field of education and policy implementation using sense-making as a frame. Weick and Dervin, among others, provide a broad contextual multidisciplinary research framework to understand sense-making; however, this research sought to weave a historical understanding of sense-making with a more contemporary understanding of the factors that contribute to sense-making in the educational policy implementation context. More specifically, the research examined sense-making and turnaround policy through the eyes of multiple policy implementers.

Contemporary implementation research builds on the work of previous decades but has expanded the field to include the study of three key dimensions in policy design: goals, targets and tools. Other researchers have then begun to offer additional theories such as the role of “co-construction” in policy implementation (Datnow, 2006), policy implementation and cognition (Spillane, Reiser & Gomez, 2006), policy implementation as organizational learning (Honig, 2006), policy implementation as a political process (Malen, 2006), and the role of social capital in policy implementation (Smylie & Evans, 2006), all contributing to an evolving definition of sense-making and its role in policy implementation. The concept of sense-making is essential to this study, as we hoped to gain insight into how policy implementers of the state turnaround legislation make sense of the policy, and what implications their sense-making might have on how they go about implementing the policy to reach policy goals. The sections below provide further detail about the various components of sense-making as identified in the literature.

**Construction and cognition.** The frame begins with a look at how implementers receive education policy information and make sense of it in light of existing knowledge. Spillane, Reiser and Gomez, (2006) talk about sense-making in terms of a “reconstruction” of knowledge for the change implementer. “What is paramount is not simply that implementing agents choose to respond to the policy but also what they understand themselves to be responding to” (Spillane et al., 2006, p. 49). When an implementer encounters new research or policy, they combine it with their existing knowledge and experience to construct new knowledge. It is this interaction between old knowledge and new information where one creates an understanding of the policy. Relating to the effective practices described in the literature review above, the role of prior knowledge may be particularly pertinent. Educators typically have a knowledge base about what good practice looks like, including best practices around instruction and leadership. When they



encounter policy that dictates certain ways to turn around a school, that prior knowledge would interact with the policy and inform how the implementer makes sense of the policy and the corresponding work. Spillane et al. (2006) further describe this as cognition. “From a cognitive perspective, implementation hinges on whether and in what ways local implementing agents' understanding of policy demands impacts the extent to which they reinforce or alter their practice” (p. 47). Spillane et al. (2006) argue that understanding is only one discrete factor. How individuals view the world, the beliefs they hold and how their expectations influence their actions also contribute to their sense-making. They further argue that learning a new idea may not be sufficient in and of itself, particularly in the context of reform and restructuring. New ideas may be in danger of being modified or ignored if they are filtered through the same existing knowledge schemas that already exist.

Spillane et al. (2006) offer a caveat about interpretation of policy given one's preexisting level of expertise. If one's understanding is limited to the superficial aspects of the policy or embodies only a rudimentary level of expertise in complex policy implementation, they may miss the core concepts of the policy and focus entirely on what is similar to their previous experience, leading to a familiar but ultimately shallow interpretation. The expertise one brings to their interpretation of a given policy determines their ability to identify key elements of the policy. Because implementation decisions are influenced by this sense-making, the interaction between expertise and policy sense-making makes a difference in how policy is implemented at the ground level (Spillane et al., 2006).

Datnow (2006) argues that this knowledge is also “co-constructed” with other members of the policy chain. Co-construction relies on multi-directionality, since over time the different implementers influence each other during the interactions that take place. While policy

implementation tends to assume a linear process, in reality, implementation is not so much a linear process but one that takes on varying directions. It is the interactions between implementers that lead to these various directions and help implementers construct an understanding of the policy. Here, the role of communication is salient in that it is through communication that people begin to make sense of what they need to do to implement the policy.

Another critical part of Datnow's (2006) co-construction is that one's understanding of policy is not divorced from the context in which they are implementing policy. She puts forth a concept of a relational sense of context, explaining that, "by this we mean that people's actions cannot be understood apart from the setting in which they are situated, and reciprocally, the setting cannot be understood without understanding the actions of the people within it" (p. 107). When people implement policy, their thinking is shaped by the situation or environment that surrounds them, which in turn influences the actions they take to implement policy. Important to consider when examining policy implementation in education, is how educators make sense of the policy, in the case of this research, turnaround policy, given their existing knowledge and their context.

**Political effect.** Malen (2006) provides a framework for assessing the role of politics on education policy implementation. She argues that implementation is a crucial point in the policy-making process because it is the point where it actually impacts various stakeholders. According to Malen (2006), there are "political exchanges" that occur during implementation that regulate the various interests of stakeholders "because they are value-laden issues that cannot be resolved solely through the acquisition of empirical evidence or the application of technical expertise" (Malen, 2006, p. 83). Relationships amongst various policy implementation actors, although they may or may not acknowledge one another, are forged and impact the degree to which policy is

implemented with fidelity, resisted, or subverted. Furthermore, because education policies are deeply value-laden, and may require reallocation of resources or question utilization of time, reaching resolution is extremely difficult. The author's framework draws extensively on the metaphorical idea of "political games" as originally proposed by Bardach's (1977) groundbreaking research, which outlined a process various policy implementers go through in order to achieve specific policy goals.

The key components of the educational policy implementation political frame include an analysis of the varied interests of actors and their capacity to influence implementation based on policy currency, and the influence of social and institutional context on implementation. Malen (2006) explains that policy implementation literature overwhelmingly identifies "policy dilution" as a major theme. In this instance, the varied interests of implementers erode social reform. The author further adds:

Even at the local level, deeply rooted traditions of incremental decision making and broadly held views about occupational survival may prompt district officials to select and enact policies that "attract...notice" and enhance legitimacy, but do not alter fundamentally, the orientations and operations of the school system (Malen, 2006, p. 97).

For Malen, the political frame can provide unique insights into policy implementation and, as the above quotation indicates, various political phenomena and "political games" played by policy implementers can greatly influence policy outcomes. The insights are key in understanding the interface between actors' interests and resources, and policy initiatives, premises and outcomes.

**Social capital.** Smylie and Evans (2006) provide insight on the impact social capital can have on education policy implementation. While social capital is a broad concept, used in

various disciplines and contexts, for the purposes of this study we adopt the definition of social capital as developed by Smylie and Evans. The authors define social capital as an “intangible and abstract resource...[that can act as an agent] to promote certain behaviors within social structures and it can be accumulated and drawn on to achieve otherwise hard to attain objectives.” (Smylie & Evans, 2006, p. 189). For Smylie and Evans (2006), social capital contains three major components, including “social trust, channels of communication, and norms, expectations, and sanctions” (p. 189-190). Trust can determine the extent to which individuals in organization want to collaborate with one another, based on their confidence in their colleagues, in order to achieve policy goals. The flow of communication is essential as successfully reaching any goal requires access to new information and furthermore requires individuals to communicate with one another. Finally, norms, expectations and sanctions can influence the extent to which individuals are praised or reprimanded for their actions based on intangible predetermined community standards. Within these confines, Smylie and Evans argue that social capital can greatly impact policy implementation and the attainment of policy goals.

The authors note that implementation research has long known that the will and capacity of implementers and how they navigate the local context could negatively impact policy outcomes. They argue that social capital can have a positive or negative impact on implementation. “Social capital is not social interaction per se. Social capital is ‘produced’ through social interaction” (Smylie and Evans, 2006, p. 189). Furthermore, social capital can be divided into two components, “trust” and “channels of communication.” These components have implications on policy implementation because the open or closed nature of relationships, based on trust, can impact whether or not an idea, program, or initiative will thrive.

The authors note that while social capital can be key to policy implementation, it can also act as a conserving force, where entrenched philosophies developed through shared norms and experiences can impede policy implementation (Smylie & Evans, 2006). They reviewed research conducted by the Chicago Annenberg Research Institute, a five-year study of decentralized reform initiatives involving efforts between schools and external partners. Smylie and Evans (2006) note that this study was not necessarily on social capital itself, but that it can be used as a window through which to view the role of social capital in the implementation of initiatives. Based on the outcomes of the Annenberg Challenge, they concluded that both the initial level of social resources and the nature of and ability to sustain relationships with external partners were two determining factors showing strong social capital, which supported implementation. Schools that began with a strong base of social resources valued teacher collaboration and had an orientation toward trust, innovation, and owning student success or failure. Some of the external partners in the Annenberg Challenge schools found it difficult to sustain relationships and communicate effectively with teachers in some schools, which led to groups of teachers using social capital to inhibit the success of reform efforts. The authors conclude their article by arguing that social capital is something that researchers should continue to pay attention to, as it can aid or inhibit the success of policy implementation.

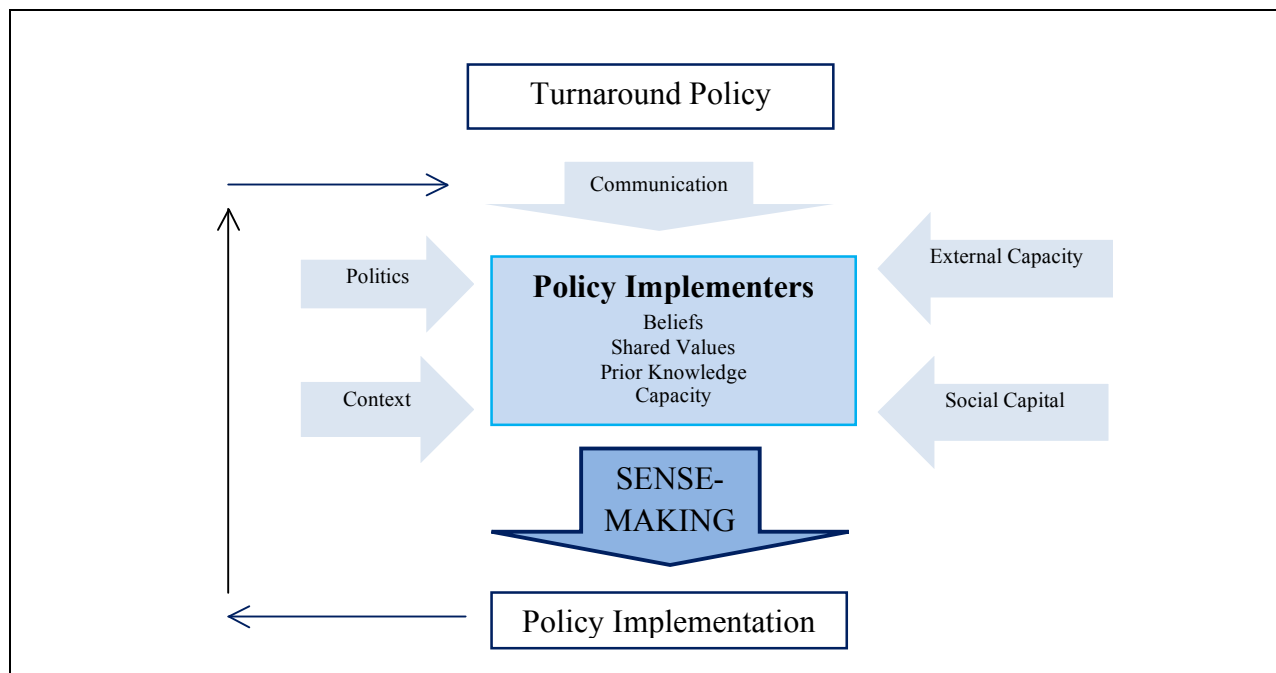
The above-mentioned components of policy sense-making each have a unique impact on how policy is implemented throughout school districts. Whether at the level of the school board, superintendent/central office, principal and leadership teams, or amongst school faculty, construction and cognition, the impact of politics, and the impact of social capital can all substantially affect policy outcomes. Understanding this is important and helpful for LEA and school leaders since time and resources are limited. The stakes are high and the impact of not

carefully considering how all of these elements work together and how they shape policy implementation could be a determining factor in the attainment of policy goals. This could mean that chronically underperforming schools fail to improve within the three-year timeframe as outlined within the state legislation. Moreover, as we outlined in the introduction to this study, for communities and cities that are relying on school and LEA leaders to produce educated and productive graduates, failure to turnaround schools has a large impact society. Therefore this study aimed to gain insight into what it takes to “get it right,” which is an essential concern of this state’s school and LEA leaders with level D schools.

### Theoretical Frame Synthesis

The theory frames outlined above are represented in the graphic below.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for How Sense-making impacts Turnaround Policy Implementation



The turnaround policy acts as the trigger that begins the process that may ultimately lead to the goal, improved student achievement. As the policy reaches the policy implementers, a number of factors influence how the implementers make sense of the policy. As outlined by Honig (2006), the implementers' beliefs, knowledge and perceptions of their own capacity to implement the policy come into play. This likely includes prior knowledge about effective practices to turn around underperforming schools. Karl Weick (1995) outlines the process policy implementers may go through in trying to understand a policy and maintains that this process is iterative. He argues that who, what, why, and a person's past can impact their understanding of policy. Dervin (1998) explains the link between a subject's understanding of a policy and their ability to construct meaning. Spillane et al. (2006) point out that cognition is dependent upon one's ability to understand a policy and alter their practice as a result. They argue that it's not enough to be able to grasp new ideas because learning new ideas using old schemas can be deleterious to success. Datnow (2006) argues that this knowledge is also "co-constructed" amongst implementers who are responsible for the policy. She further adds that implementer actions cannot be divorced from their context, and consequently the context is better understood by assessing the impact of implementer actions on the context. This means that the implementers actions continuously changes context and therefore context can be better understood through study of implementer cognition. Malen (2006) provides insight into the types of political exchanges that take place and the effect they might have on decisions around time and resource. Malen argues that actions and decisions can become high stakes and uses the concept of "political games" to describe the impact of politics on policy implementation. Smylie and Evans (2006) note that social capital has a significant impact on policy implementation. They add that social capital is not defined as simple human interaction, but instead intentional interactions

between implementers. In this context, social capital can be divided into two categories, trust and communication. Externally the context in which the implementers operate, the influence of politics, and social processes they engage in make sense of the policy. The perception that there may or may not be external capacity to support successful implementation of the policy may influence the eventual sense-making the policy implementers make of the original policy. Their understanding guides how the policy will be implemented in the day-to-day context of turnaround schools. Policy implementation then becomes an iterative process that is ongoing, constantly refined and modified by new knowledge, new emotions and new understanding or sense-making (Weick, 1995).

### **Research Gap**

Ample literature exists around efforts to turn around underperforming schools. This includes a wide range of research studies that look at how schools are able to raise the level of performance of their students in challenging contexts. Studies have shown how certain practices contribute to successful school turnaround. Yet, not all of these studies look at turnaround in terms of policies that dictate the turnaround process. In this state, the legislation mandates that schools designated as turnaround schools need to comply with specific requirements to raise student academic achievement. This informs turnaround work in ways that have not yet been addressed in the literature. A critical part of this research is that turnaround policies dictate turnaround efforts to occur within a relatively short timeframe (e.g. 3 years). However, researchers' descriptions of all the elements that go into making sense of any policy suggest this to be a complex and perhaps lengthy process. This research study not only addressed the gap in the literature about making sense of turnaround policy and how it influences implementation, but



also considered the fact that the policy only allows three years to turn around a school. The gap in turnaround research exists at the intersection of practices that are shown to turn around an underperforming school and turnaround policy implementation.

Another body of literature looks at the role of policy sense-making in policy implementation. Focused on policy implementers, this sense-making includes internal or individual processes (e.g. reconstruction of knowledge) and external influences (e.g. co-construction and politics). Research studies have examined how sense-making has worked with specific policies. In these studies, researchers were able to get a glimpse into the sense-making process in the context of actual policy implementation. However, research on sense-making with this specific turnaround policy is lacking. This is a matter of practical and urgent importance to LEA's across the state as all stakeholders within the school community are concerned with improving chronically underperforming schools. With the high stakes nature of this turnaround school reform effort, the way in which district leaders understand the legislation will significantly impact the educational success for thousands of students throughout the state.

Successful policy implementation may be dependent upon understanding the policy at face value and LEA leaders ensuring that the political context, shared values, capacity, and colleague sense-making do not negatively impact implementation. Getting it right could mean positive outcomes for students and schools that have chronically underperformed, which would ultimately lead to increased student achievement and a change in classification from level D to level C and beyond. The stakes are high as unsuccessful implementation could mean schools and LEA's become level F, and risk state take over. More importantly, unsuccessful implementation results in inferior education, which is detrimental to individuals, families, the state, and the nation.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology<sup>4</sup>**

#### **The Community Context**

The city, which is the site of this research study, is located in the Northeast and its history and development has followed a path similar to that of most beleaguered industrial mill towns—intense growth and dramatic decline followed by fits and starts at resurgence. Geography and the immediate access to both a port of entry and water power from nearby rivers made the community a desirable location for bringing in raw materials, manufacturing them into goods, and redistributing them out via the port to other parts of the country. At the height of its power, the city employed more than 30,000 workers. Thousands of immigrants arrived during the boom period between 1865 and 1923, coming primarily from Ireland, England, Scotland and Italy as well as Canada, Portugal and the Azores. As each immigrant group arrived, they proudly claimed certain parts of the city as their own, most settling in triple decker units built by mill owners and usually under the spire of a Catholic church. Portuguese immigrants, settled in tight knit communities that allowed residents to maintain their language, culture and traditions. In 1920, the population of the community was 120,485, primarily of European descent. Not unlike many mill cities throughout the country, the city foresaw a bright and long future for its residents and its community. The city's decline would be dramatic and difficult to reverse. It began with the Depression of the 1930s, followed by the closing of mills and manufacturing plants in the 1940s and 1950s. An attempt at urban renewal in the 1960s and 1970s created housing and

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anna Carollo Cross, Jamie B. Chisum, Jill S. Geiser, Charles Grandson IV

infrastructure but demolished some close-knit communities in the process. Globalization, economic hardship, rising unemployment, crime, drugs and failing schools plagued the city through the 1980s, 1990s and into the 2000s.

The city's population has steadily declined from its peak in 1920 to 89,220. The vast majority (87 percent) continues to identify themselves as having European ancestry, but a growing percentage of the population (29.6 percent) report Latin America, Asia and Africa as their region of birth. Based on the 2010 Census data, 26 percent of the foreign-born population entered the United States in 2000 or later. About 34.2 percent of the households speak a language other than English in the home, and 21.4 percent of the residents live below the poverty level, double the poverty level for the state. According to a recent study, the poverty rate for children under 18 is 33.3 percent, which means that one in every three children in the city is currently living in poverty. Many live as renters in multi-unit structures, remnants of the housing stock created for mill workers. In terms of educational attainment, 32.5 percent of the adults over the age of 25 do not hold a high school diploma, a mere 14.1 percent of the adults over 25 hold a bachelors degree or higher. This is a city under stress, which has struggled to maintain its identity and its pride. The school system is seen as a key ingredient to improve the quality of life for its residents and restore the economic future of the city.

### **The LEA Context**

In recent years turning around the city has focused on turning around the public school system. The LEA has an enrollment of 10,138 students. Over the last ten years the demographics of the student population has changed both socio-economically and racially. This is significant in

that the school system has had to respond to this rapidly shifting demographic as it has worked to turn around the schools.

Table 1: LEA Demographic Shifts from 2003 to 2013

<b>Population Category</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2013</b>
White	77.3%	63.3%
Hispanic	9.0%	19.9%
African American	8.1%	7.0%
Native American	0.6%	0.3%
Asian	5.1%	4.5%
Low-Income	50.9%	77.9%
English Language Learners	5.5%	7.1%
Students w/ Disabilities	14.8%	22.4%

In 2003 the student population was 77.3 percent white, 9 percent Hispanic, 5.1 percent Asian, 8.1 percent African American, and .6 percent Native American. Since 2003, the Hispanic population has more than doubled to 19.9 percent, the white population has declined to 63.3 percent, and the percent of African American, Asian and Native American students has remained relatively constant. The percentages of students who are considered selected populations under state indicators has also changed over the years. The percentages of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch increased from 60.5 in 2007 to 77.9 in 2013. Increases are also noted in the percentages of students whose first language is not English and of students with disabilities. In 2013, the state added a new category to its annual statistics, the percentage of students in the

LEA who qualify as “high needs,” who constitute 81.5 percent of the students who attend the public schools in this LEA.

Two other notable areas of demographics were the graduation and drop-out rates which exceed that of the state. Interestingly, the largest attrition rate between grades occurs at grade 8 with 32.9 percent of the students choosing to leave the schools.

Table 2: LEA and State 2012 4-Year Graduation and Drop-Out Rates

	<b>LEA</b>	<b>LEA</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>State</b>
<b>Population Category</b>	<b>% Graduated</b>	<b>% Dropped Out</b>	<b>% Graduated</b>	<b>% Dropped Out</b>
All Students	69	17.9	84.7	6.9
Male	61.5	23.1	81.8	8
Female	76.8	12.5	87.7	5.7
ELL	44.1	23.5	61.1	18.9
Students w/ Disabilities	35.7	34.3	68.6	12.8
Low Income	64.2	20.6	72.4	13.2
African American	70.1	14.9	73.4	11.3
Asian	90.9	4.5	89.5	3.9
Hispanic	60.8	25.5	65.5	18.1
White	69.6	17	89.7	4.3

This table shows the 4-year high school graduation rate to be 69 percent. The high school dropout rate at 17.9 percent is almost double that of the state average of 6.9 percent. The largest groups to drop out of high school are English Language Learners (ELL) students, Hispanic and

Latino students, and students with disabilities. Males drop out of high schools at more than double the rate of females. These are challenging statistics as they reflect a school system that struggles to serve a diverse student population.

Over the past several years, this LEA has been focused on turning around its underperforming schools. Schools have moved in and out of turnaround status, with some showing significant gains in student achievement and others not.

Table 3: 2013 LEA Schools and Their Accountability and Assistance Levels

<b>School</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Title I Status</b>	<b>Accountability and Assistance Level</b>
School 1	Elementary	Non-Title I School	Level A
School 2	Elementary	Title I School	Level C
School 3	Elementary	Title I School	Level C
School 4	Elementary	Title I School	Level C
School 5	Elementary	Title I School	Insufficient data
School 6	Elementary	Title I School	Level A
School 7	Elementary	Non-Title I School	Level A
School 8	Elementary	Non-Title I School	Level C
School 9	Elementary	Title I School	Level D
School 10	Elementary-Middle	Title I School	Level B
School 11	Middle	Title I School	Level C
School 12 (School was closed spring 2013)	Middle	Title I School	Level D

School 13	Middle	Non-Title I School	Level C
School 14	Middle	Title I School	Level A
School 15	Middle	Title I School	Insufficient data
School 16	High	Title I School	Insufficient data
School 17	High	Non-Title I School	Level C

There are total of 16 schools in the LEA (with one school that closed in spring 2013). One of the high schools listed here is one of the top ten largest high schools in the state with an enrollment of 2276. In addition, there are nine elementary schools, three middle schools, one pre-K through grade 7 school, one therapeutic high school, and one therapeutic middle school. The LEA is considered a level D system by the state, a designation that results from one or more schools in the LEA failing to meet student achievement goals relative to student performance on the state assessment system. Presently, there are four level A schools, one level B school, seven level C schools and one level D school.

State intervention under NCLB began in the LEA as far back as 2004 when two middle schools were the first in the state to be designated as “chronically underperforming” based on their state assessment data. Over the next several years, the achievement levels of the schools were in flux, moving between periods of growth and decline. When the 2010 state turnaround legislation was passed, those two schools, along with a third, the pre-k through grade 7 school, received level D designation, which threw them into a rigorous turnaround process. Growth occurred in two of these schools over the three-year turnaround process and both schools were exited out of turnaround status in 2013. Indeed, both schools showed such significant gains that one moved to level B and the other to level A. In the meantime, the third school that was

originally designated a level D school in 2010, showed a decline in student achievement over the three year period. For that school, there was impending threat of level F designation, which would have meant state takeover. With that level F designation a possibility, the LEA decided to close that school in spring 2013 and transfer its staff and students to other schools in the system. While these schools were nearing the end of their turnaround process, another school was emerging on the horizon for turnaround status. That school was in level C when it declined to level D status in 2013. At the time of this research study, that school had just embarked on the turnaround process.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative design was chosen for this study because this methodology is best used to address a research problem in which the variables may be unknown, the literature may be limited and the researcher may need to develop a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon by exploring the research questions with participants (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative methodology allowed an in-depth exploration into the research questions: How do implementers' (superintendent/central office, building leaders, teachers, school board members) make sense of state turnaround policy? How does this sense-making influence policy implementation? What factors influence implementer sense-making?

### **Case Study Design**

Case study design was used to explore the sense-making of various stakeholders implementing the turnaround process as mandated by the state turnaround legislation. Merriam (2009) notes, "the case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of



multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 50). Yin (2009) explains that the case study approach to research is used “...to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompassed important contextual conditions—because they were highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study...” (p. 18). Given the complexity of sense-making as outlined previously, the case study approach allowed the researchers to understand how implementation occurred in a specific LEA that was undergoing turnaround work as dictated by the policy. Yin (2009) discusses various applications of the case study research design, one of which is a description of a real-life intervention and its context. As noted in the literature review, efforts to improve chronically underperforming schools have been chronicled in many research studies. This research offers a unique view of the role of sense-making by looking at this process through the lens of the implementation of turnaround policy with the aim to improve school performance. In this case, the intervention was the turnaround policy and the context was the LEA where implementers were required to put that policy into action. Here, the context became an important part of this research and, given this, we looked to the case study approach as one which would produce information that would lead to a deeper understanding of turnaround policy implementation.

**Single case study.** Having established the case study as the overall design, this study investigated the research questions through a single case study method. The research focused on one LEA, which was identified through the process described in the Unit of Analysis section below. Yin (2009) points out that single case studies may be representative cases, or “typical” cases, of a given phenomenon. As a single case study, this research examined the implementation of turnaround policy in an LEA as representative of the process of implementation. We were interested in looking at these implementation questions in-depth in one

LEA. A single case study allowed for a deeper understanding of how each stakeholder group made sense of the turnaround policy and how that sense-making influenced their decisions and actions around policy implementation. In addition, a single case study was more feasible for this study given limitations in access to turnaround LEA's and time allotted for data collection.

**Unit of analysis.** Included in a single case study approach was the need to identify the unit of analysis as well as the theory development. Where the unit of analysis is defined by your “case,” the theory provides a potential explanation of the phenomenon that the researchers use to approach their data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009). This research examined how turnaround work was implemented according to the state turnaround legislation. This policy identifies turnaround schools through specific criteria and designates those schools as level D schools. Local education agencies (LEA) that have at least one of their schools designated as a level D school are then designated level D LEA's and are required to implement the turnaround policy. For this research, the unit of analysis was a specified level D LEA where the process of implementing turnaround policy was in process.

## **Sampling**

There were two levels of sampling for this research study: LEA and implementer selection.

**LEA sampling.** Because the unit of analysis was the LEA, the one selected for this study was a level D LEA that was in the process of implementing the turnaround policy. Therefore, purposeful sampling was used in order to intentionally select a site to learn about the central phenomenon of turnaround policy implementation (Creswell, 2012). At the time of selection,

there were ten level D LEA's in the state. Of the ten, two were eliminated due to researcher affiliation. Of the remaining eight, one level D LEA was chosen based on the following criteria:

- 1) Access to implementers in the LEA was available.
- 2) The superintendent was willing to participate in and support the research.
- 3) The LEA was in the process of implementing the turnaround policy in a level D school.
- 4) The LEA had active participation in policy implementation by all four of the stakeholder groups identified in this study (superintendent/central office, school leadership, teachers, school board members).

**Participant sampling.** Participants for interviews in this study were selected to provide data about the role of the implementers, which each of the researchers were researching in individual sections: superintendent/central office personnel, building leaders, teachers, and school board members. (Interview methodology is discussed below in the data collection section.) Each of the individual studies had specific sampling approaches that were impacted by timing and logistics of data collection. In general, though, the participant sampling for this study included purposeful and snowball sampling. We went into data collection with a preference for random sampling because, as Creswell (2012) states, the benefit of random sampling is that those that participate are representative of the population under study. However, when we made initial contact with the LEA, we found that time constraints precluded our ability to use random sampling. We had limited time to conduct interviews and, therefore relied on purposeful and snowball sampling for the selection of interviewees. Purposeful sampling was used when certain implementers were chosen because their role gave them a specific perspective on turnaround implementation that might have been different from other implementers. Snowball sampling was

used when educators in the LEA recommended implementers after data collection began. As Creswell (2012) notes, snowball sampling is often used when it is difficult to know at the outset of the study, which individuals should participate. In this study, it was difficult to know which implementers would be willing to participate and snowball sampling allowed the researchers to identify willing participants.

For the umbrella group study, purposeful sampling was used to identify the LEA, which the researchers did jointly. For each of the individual studies, participant sampling may have involved either purposeful or snowball sampling. These sampling approaches are further described in each of the individual studies.

## **Data Collection**

A key part of data collection in this case study research involved the use of multiple sources of evidence. With multiple sources of data, triangulation can be applied, which in turn can bolster findings and lead to more convincing conclusions (Yin, 2009). For this case study research, evidence came from three sources of data: document analysis, interviews, and observations.

**Document analysis.** The data collection methods began with document and video analysis. Creswell (2012) lauds the use of documents to provide valuable evidence in qualitative research. Yin (2009) echoes the benefit of documents in case studies, stating that they are unobtrusive in that they are not the result of the case study itself and that they contain exact details of an event. The document analysis in this research started with an analysis of the state turnaround legislation. The policy was outlined and dissected to frame the turnaround process that the LEA was implementing. Further document analysis included some of the LEA's own

turnaround plans that were written in compliance with the policy as well as state monitoring documents. Historical documents, media reports, and LEA demographic and achievement data were included to help gain a deeper understanding of the context. Documents reviewed included meeting minutes of school board meetings. Because some of these minutes were in the form of a video recording, document review went beyond actual documents to include some review of recordings. Any document analysis that pertained to individual studies is also described in those sections.

**Interviews.** Interviews were conducted to understand implementers' interpretation of the turnaround policy. According to Yin (2009), interviews help to provide insight into human affairs or behavioral events as well as the opinions and attitudes to explain such behavioral events. For this research, the behavioral event was the implementation of the policy and interviews aimed to understand those events and accompanying implementers' attitudes and opinions. This allowed the researchers to analyze how implementer groups interpreted the policy and used that interpretation to inform their implementation decisions.

This research study used semi-structured interviews. Patton (2002) discusses the various types of interviews, noting one structure where an interview guide may be used to provide guidance regarding the questions asked, while leaving room for probing. Interview guides provide the same basic lines of inquiry for all interviews; yet, interviewers may be spontaneous about how to word questions during the interview. A systematic approach for multiple interviews, the interview guide is a framework that outlines the questions to be asked, the sequence of questions and the questions to be explored further (Patton, 2002). An interview guide (See Appendix E) was used to allow us the flexibility to be more personal with our interviewees, which increased our likelihood of gathering valid data. For this research study,

interviews were semi-structured, which focused on how subjects interpreted the policy and how that interpretation influenced how they implemented turnaround.

Interviews were conducted by each of the researchers using the same interview process. We each conducted 6 to 10 interviews for each of our implementer groups, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes each. A total of 29 implementers were interviewed across the four groups—central office personnel, school board members, school leaders, and teachers. The interview process began with a consent form signed by the participant (See Appendix C). The interviews were then conducted using a protocol (See Appendices D and F). Interviews were recorded for participants who granted permission and then transcribed verbatim. The research team was sensitive to the fact that the people working in this turnaround LEA were in a potentially vulnerable situation, both professionally and personally, as there is often a stigma associated with working in a LEA with a level D designation. The consent form for participants in the study included language that allowed individuals to opt out of the study or end the interview at any time without loss or penalty. The consent form also gave flexibility for the participant to choose not to answer any individual question. The researchers attempted to craft the interview questions to be sensitive to the vulnerability of participants.

**Field test.** The methodology also addressed the need to ensure the interview questions would yield information needed to respond to the overall research questions. As we constructed the interview questions, we considered the different domains of our research questions and the kinds of language within each question that would allow significant and pertinent data to emerge. Yet, one of the concerns was whether the questions would allow this to happen. Weiss (1994) discusses the benefits of piloting interviews as a field test, which may indicate where the interview questions are redundant or over weighted in one area and lacking in another. It can also

show where questions are confusing. With this in mind, we tested the interview questions once with a teacher who was working in a Level D school in a LEA that was not a part of this study. We then convened to determine if such redundancy or lacking existed and, from there, made any needed revisions. We went into data collection with a set of interview questions we believed would yield the data we needed to address the research questions. However, when we began the interviews, we found that we needed to adjust questions to better elicit information related to the research questions. Some of the adjustments depended on the implementer groups and are described in the individual studies where pertinent.

**Observations.** Another data collection tool we used were observations. Observations are useful in research to document information as it occurs in a specific setting and analyzes actual behavior (Creswell, 2012). For this research, observations helped the researchers gain insight into how people processed the ideas put forth by the policy around turnaround work and how they behaved in terms of implementing these policy ideas. Yin (2009) distinguishes between formal observations and casual data collection activities. Formal observations entail observing meetings or other school activities, whereas casual data collection may come from site visits in the context of conducting interviews. We used observation data obtained casually in the context of interviewing as well as data from formal observations. Formal observations took place at school board meetings and one local stakeholder group meeting. For these, we followed Creswell's (2012) suggestion for observation protocol and used one that was designed to allow for a description of the chronological order of events along with a reflection about themes and quotes. We were non-participant observers and took field notes either during or after the observation. Creswell (2012) emphasizes the importance of descriptive and reflective field notes, which involve a description of events along with personal thoughts and insights of the observer.

Our field notes included both descriptive and reflective elements. Field notes were then analyzed alongside the transcriptions from interviews. The role of observations in data collection differed for each of the individual studies and is described in more detail in those sections where applicable.

## **Data Analysis**

When analyzing the data, the focus was on extracting data that pertained to the role of each of the implementers of the turnaround policy. For this, we used a coding process that allowed key themes to emerge from the data.

**Coding.** Coding was the first step in our analysis of the data. We coded the interviews once they were transcribed by an outside agency. Creswell (2012) outlines a coding process for interview data that includes reading through transcriptions, identifying codes, and collapsing codes into themes. The analysis of interview data in this research used this coding process in order to center on key themes, which emerged across the interviews. Miles and Huberman (1994) discuss the benefits of using a “start list” for coding, which is created prior to fieldwork. The “start list” contains a list of codes that is devised from the conceptual framework, research questions, hypotheses, problem areas and any other important variables. Our “start list” included codes such as collaboration, making sense, communication, student impact, and reflection, among others, and we used this “start list” (See Appendix B) to begin the coding process. Once interviews were transcribed, the coding process began by looking at the transcriptions with the “start list” as a backdrop. That is, we began our analysis according to which information was consistent with the codes on the start list. We quickly realized that while some of the codes on the start list were useful, there were several concepts that were not represented on our list.



Therefore, we made adjustments to the list of codes, adding codes and deleting others. As a group, we established a list of parent codes at the beginning. As individual researchers proceeded through their coding, they added child codes to the parent codes where needed. We used the qualitative research software, Dedoose, to code transcripts and to organize our codes.

**Collaborative coding.** The group process utilized in the analysis was key in this research study. Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) describe the process of consensual qualitative research (CQR) where a team of researchers engages in the process of co-analyzing data. CQR “...highlights the use of multiple researchers, the process of reaching consensus, and a systematic way of examining the representativeness of results across cases” (p. 519). It occurs in three main steps where researchers divide the data into domains, then construct core ideas within the domains and finally cross analyze to identify consistencies across cases. While the analysis portion of this research study did not necessarily follow these steps verbatim, the underlying tenet that informs CQR was pertinent here.

Team members first examine the data independently and then come together to present and discuss their ideas until they reach a single unified version that all team members endorse as the best representation of the data. Using several researchers provides a variety of opinions and perspectives, helps to circumvent the biases of any one person, and is helpful for capturing the complexity of the data (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997, p. 523).

The group process for this research followed a modified version of CQR, which provided a structure for the group to code the data together, then to analyze the data individually. As a collaborative research study, we analyzed one transcript together to determine how to use the codes from the coding list. From there, we made further adjustments to the list of codes and

established the use of parent and child codes. We agreed that it was possible for individual researchers to use some codes and not others, depending on their implementer group. Once we calibrated our coding practices, we coded our interviews individually, and then convened to compare our coding and to check our calibration. Once all interview transcriptions were coded and individual sections analyzed, we joined together to identify overarching themes that cut across implementer groups and drew conclusions and potential implications for turnaround LEA's. Because there were four researchers looking at the data, interrater reliability was significant. This process of calibrating through co-analyzing the data assisted with interrater reliability.

**Document analysis.** As Yin (2009) points out, information from documents should be corroborated and augmented by evidence from other sources. Documents were examined for specific details that were not obtained through other sources. The state turnaround legislation had already been analyzed prior to data collection to gain an understanding of the requirements of level D schools. Beyond the policy, other documents that were analyzed were documents related to turnaround work, including the LEA Accelerated Improvement Plan, LEA Recovery Plan, and a level D school's School Redesign Grant (SRG) Monitoring Site Visit. We also reviewed media material as well as LEA performance data to understand the context within which the turnaround occurred. Consistent with Yin's (2009) description, document analysis in this research was not intended to provide definitive findings, but rather to allow for inferences to be made that could lead to further investigation via other sources of evidence. In this study, document analysis served to develop further understanding of the LEA, which provided context for the findings. Document analysis beyond the policy itself involved different roles in each of the individual studies and is described where applicable.

**Drawing conclusions.** As we analyzed the data, one way we tested our conclusions was through structural corroboration. Eisner (1976) highlights the importance of structural corroboration in his discussion about educational criticism.

Structural corroboration is a process that seeks to validate or support one's conclusions about a set of phenomena by demonstrating how a variety of facts or conditions within the phenomena support the conclusions drawn. It is a process of demonstrating that the story hangs together, that the pieces fit. (p. 148)

Although Eisner refers to the process of validating the evaluation of educational practice, this concept applies to the analysis of data in this study. Because we were intent on ensuring conclusions were substantiated through the data, we compared what interviewees said about the various issues within the research topic, with each other, and with observational and document data. Through this comparison of data, we were able to understand how individual pieces of data fit together in order to lead to coherent conclusions, particularly relative to the overall recommendations.

## **Limitations**

The major limitations of this qualitative research were researcher bias, generalizability, and reliability. We discuss below how these limitations were addressed through the methodology.

**Researcher bias.** The role of researcher bias was a consideration in this study, particularly since all of the researchers currently hold positions as practicing educators responsible for the implementation of education policy. In at least two cases, researchers were specifically responsible for the implementation of school turnaround policy. A key component of

qualitative research is that it values direct observation and data gathered from interactions between the researcher and the research subject. The researcher becomes a research instrument and therefore brings their own lens to the data collection and analysis. Yin (2011) argues that, “No lens is free of bias; every lens has subjective and objective qualities” (p. 270). Researchers must maintain a high degree of awareness and self-reflection about the qualities of any “lens” that might influence either the collection or analysis of the data. In particular, use of interviews as a source of evidence in qualitative research can strengthen the data collection process as it allows for targeted questioning. However, it also has inherent weaknesses of bias in self-reporting, recalling inaccuracies due to time-lapse, and reflexivity, where the participants report what the interviewer wants to hear (Yin, 2009).

Miles and Huberman (1994) identify two additional sources of researcher bias: (a) the effects of the researcher on the case and (b) the effects of the case on the researcher. In the first case, the presence of the researcher can serve as a disruption to the relationships and dynamics that exist in an institution. In the second instance, the researcher can be seduced by the environment or the participants. As a result, they might draw conclusions or inferences that may be influenced by the bias they have developed rather than the facts and data they have collected. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend several strategies to mitigate the effects of bias (a) and bias (b) such as: seeking feedback from colleagues on potential areas of bias by sharing field notes and observations, purposefully selecting participants who represent dissident voices, maintaining a focus on the research questions to avoid becoming distracted by other leads, and paying attention to the possible effects the interview location or the interview process itself may have on data collection. With these recommendations in mind, through the collaborative coding process, we discussed at length the themes we were identifying and where our bias may have

filtered in. This helped us to keep our analysis as close to the data as possible, without being heavily influenced by our biases. In addition, we had dissident voices in our selection of participants, which we incorporated into our analysis. Similar to the data collection methods, bias is addressed more specifically in each of the individual sections.

**Generalizability.** One criticism of a single case study approach is that external validity is weak because the findings may not be generalizable. In comparing single and multiple case studies, Yin (2009) cautions that using a single case study could have less weight than multiple case studies and perhaps offer less theoretical replication. As we began to design this single LEA case study, we knew that generalizability could have been an issue in that the findings may not have been clearly applicable to other LEA's going through the turnaround process as required by policy, because conditions between LEA's vary. This dissertation-in-practice research brought in the use of theory to help address this limitation of external validity.

The theory centered on the relationship between policy sense-making and implementation in the context of turning around an underperforming school. That is, the complexity of the process of policy sense-making, as previously outlined in the theoretical frame of this research, along with the inherent difficulties of chronically underperforming schools, challenges implementation of that policy by implementers. With this research design, we aimed to understand what it meant to be a school going through the turnaround process through the lens of policy sense-making and implementation. The theory helped to address external validity because the findings might be generalizable to a broader theory that in turn may be applied to other contexts. Yin's (2011) explanation of analytic generalization highlights the importance of the role of theory in the study in terms of generalizing the findings.

The argument needs to be cast in relation to existing research literature, not the specific conditions in the actual study. In other words, the goal is to pose the proposition and hypotheses at a conceptual level higher than that of the specific findings (Typically, this higher level might have been needed to justify the research importance to study the chosen topic in the first place) (p. 101).

Also helpful to the validity question was how the researchers describe the case. Merriam (1998) discusses ways of addressing validity, including providing a rich, thick description that shows that conclusions are reasonable and make sense. In other words, the more thorough the description of the LEA, the more accurate conclusions would be. The aim of the research was to provide a detailed description in order to support findings drawn from the data, to allow others to make their own connection to the study's conclusions. In this way, the reader would determine to what extent the findings can be transferred based on the thorough description of the context and its findings in the case under study (Merriam, 1998). Through a detailed depiction of the case, this study increased the likelihood the reader would be able to determine whether or not the findings are transferable to another situation where turnaround policy is being implemented.

**Reliability.** For case study research, reliability is achieved through specific documentation of the research process. Yin (2009) points out that case studies that use a protocol and database have stronger reliability. The protocol is the data collection instrument along with a specified set of procedures to be followed. A database is developed from the data collection instruments. Both of these help make it possible for another investigator to replicate the research procedures. This research study used a protocol that outlined the procedures of all data collection instruments, including the interviews, observations and document analysis. We also used the

qualitative research software, Dedoose, as our database for interviews, where we were able to code and analysis transcripts.

In addition we ensured our data quality through a rigorous assessment of our analysis and conclusions. Miles and Huberman (1994) offer a model that involves thirteen tactics that will help address this need for a demanding approach to drawing conclusions from the data. These tactics involve a process of checking the quality of the data, analyzing exceptions to patterns, and checking with skepticism emerging explanations. For this study, the researchers focused on the following four tactics:

- 1) Checking for representativeness - Ensuring that the data coming from your sources is representative of both confirming and dissident voices;
- 2) Weighting the evidence - Accounting for the fact that some sources provide stronger data in the analysis based on the participants' roles, knowledge about the turnaround policy, and their level of involvement in the work of turning around the school. This weighting of evidence may differ in the analysis of each individual section because we each focused on a different implementer group.
- 3) Checking the meaning of outliers - Scrutinizing outlying data to make sure that analyses to test the generality of the finding and protect against self-selecting biases;
- 4) Checking out rival explanations - Keeping in mind a few possible explanations until one emerges as more compelling as a result of stronger evidence derived from additional data collection.

These tactics provided a guide for us to analyze the data, identify themes and draw conclusions. Using all of these tactics, along with the CQR collaborative data analysis approach, helped us to ensure the validity of our conclusions and alleviate the biases that may have arisen

in our analyses. It also helped us ensure that the narrative we told in the end fit the data we found.



## Chapter 4

### School Leaders as Implementers<sup>5</sup>

#### Problem Statement

As described in the problem statement of the larger study, we are in an age of accountability that puts increasing pressure on school leaders to show achievement results. With the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2002, dictating that schools be evaluated according to their ability to demonstrate that their students are learning, the greater focus on results, as shown by standardized testing, has raised questions for practitioners about how to lead schools these days. Specifically, in this state, legislation outlines the turnaround process that chronically underperforming schools must undergo with the aim to demonstrate higher student achievement within a 3-year period. Although school turnaround is not new, this short time frame increases the pressure for rapid improvement and puts chronically underperforming schools in the spotlight. The role of school principals and their leadership teams according to this policy centers on turnaround implementation. After a school is designated a level D school, the principal may participate in the local stakeholders' group, which forwards turnaround plan recommendations to the superintendent. Beyond that, a principal's status in the school becomes uncertain. If the local education agency (LEA) applies for the school improvement grant, which most do, they must implement one of the four turnaround models, all of which require a change in school leadership for a principal who has been at the school for at least two years (Race to the Top Fund, 2009). This means that between the time of designation and when the turnaround plan

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is finalized, the superintendent makes the decision as to whether the current principal will stay in the position or be replaced. Once this decision is made, whether it be the current or a new principal, the principal's work revolves around the turnaround efforts. This begins with the establishment of a school redesign team that oversees the implementation of the school redesign plan. This becomes the team that guides the turnaround work at the school and has a significant role in ensuring components of the redesign plan are carried out.

Understanding that the competencies that the school leadership brings to this work are significant factors in determining turnaround success, what follows then is the question about how school leaders effectively guide schools through the turnaround process to show such results and if a certain set of leadership skills are needed to accomplish this. This alludes to the emergence of a form of turnaround leadership as a specialized set of practices. Salmonowicz (2009) suggests that school turnaround leadership work requires certain skills when he states, "principals without specialized training in school turnaround should spend considerable time learning how their peers have gone about the process" (p. 21). As pressure on low-performing schools intensifies, the call for new leadership, with competencies specific to turning around schools, seems to get louder.

This section examines the research questions through the eyes of school leadership. The different school leadership teams in this LEA may be comprised of the principal, assistant principal, department heads, and coaches. Led by the principal, the school leadership team is charged with the responsibility of implementing turnaround efforts at the school level as outlined in the turnaround and redesign plans. Their understanding of the policy first, and plans second, is important to the turnaround process. How they see their role and responsibilities as school leaders and leadership practices they believe to be needed for successful turnaround impact how

they help to guide the turnaround process for their school. This is the intersection of policy implementation and leadership. For a school leadership team, leadership practices are at the crux of turnaround work and integrate into their sense-making and implementation of turnaround policy and practice, which leads to the questions that guide this research.

- How does their sense-making of turnaround policy and process influence their implementation of turnaround work?
- How do school leadership teams make sense of the policy that dictates turnaround work?  
What factors influence sense-making of school leaders?

## **Prior Research**

The literature review of our larger study has shown that research studies have investigated effective school practices that improve performance of chronically underperforming schools with challenging conditions. Many of these practices can be applied to the work of school leadership and go far to outline steps a leader can take to increase performance of schools with challenging conditions. Yet, a further look into specific models of leadership associated with school improvement helps to illuminate how school-level leadership impacts improvement efforts. The literature review for this section of the research looks at what the literature says about different leadership models, namely transformational leadership and instructional leadership, and how they may contribute to school improvement efforts. The review here considers a broad range of literature about leadership that is effective in turning around underperforming schools that might not necessarily be in the context of turnaround policy implementation.

**Transformational Leadership.** The transformational leadership model is discussed relative to improvement for underperforming schools and defined in terms of how it may or may not help move an organization forward. The literature points to several facets of transformational leadership, but centers on the idea of how transformational leadership is able to change the school on all levels so that it becomes more effective and of higher quality. Bass and Avolio (1993) early on dissected the meaning of transformational leadership where they highlight the relationship between leadership and culture. They emphasize a leadership of relationship-building, capacity building, and vision-setting, all of which have been identified in literature about improvement of underperforming schools. Building on Bass and Avolio's description, others have taken up the task of articulating what transformational leadership is and looks like in practice. Leithwood (1994) states that transformational leaders attend to all facets of leadership and utilize their problem-solving expertise. He further claims that it is the clarity around one's values that substitute for knowledge when that knowledge is absent in the face of new problems. With this, transformational leadership fosters trust, loyalty and a sense of affiliation. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) compare transformational leadership and management in their study of elementary school educators. For them, transformational leadership includes setting the vision, providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualized support, symbolizing professional practice and values, demonstrating high performance expectations, and fostering participation in school decisions. They contrast these against the management dimensions of instructional support, monitoring school activities, and community focus. This implies that in order to move a school forward, leadership needs to go beyond managing a school and transform the practice of teaching and learning. Hallinger (2003) contributes to the definition, stating that empowerment and shared leadership is needed to institute second-order change, or change that will increase the

capacity of others in the school to produce high quality curriculum and instruction. Other elements of transformational leadership include collaboration, particularly in the area of problem-solving and in the overall improvement efforts of the school (Copland, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003) and actions that inspire staff to new levels of commitment to a common vision (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Where the transformational leadership model highlights problem-solving, communicating a vision, high expectations, collaboration and shared leadership, there appears to be a complimentary relationship between transformational leadership and overall effective practices for turning around underperforming schools that were outlined previously.

**Instructional Leadership.** Instructional leadership is another model that can help to frame the work of turnaround leadership. Hallinger (2003) states that instructional leadership is about monitoring instructional practice and targeting first-order change where there is a direct link between the principal's actions and the quality of curriculum and teaching. Robinson, et al. (2008) add to the definition by stating that the learning climate is free from distractions, has clear teaching objectives and high expectations for students, and that fostering this climate is the job of several in the school. They also emphasize that relationships are built around the specific work of pedagogy. Marks and Printy (2003) state that under the instructional leadership model, the principal is the source of teaching expertise and seeks to standardize teaching practice across classrooms in the school. Looking at instructional leadership compared to transformational leadership, it is worth noting that according to Hallinger (2003), they have shared characteristics. He emphasizes that under both models, the leader creates a shared purpose, establishes a culture of high expectations, provides intellectual stimulation for staff, and models values being taught. The characteristics of instructional leadership presented here appear to be consistent with some

of the effective turnaround practices previously described. Quite significant is the similarity between how the relationships between instructional and turnaround practices are defined. Both look at those relationships as key to the reform process, but emphasize that they must focus on the work of teaching and learning and high expectations for students.

**Relating the two models to turnaround.** Researchers have compared these models in terms of how well they may guide the work of turning around a school. Whether to use one model over another requires looking at the different elements of each and their relationship with each other. Examining how transformational and instructional leadership models compare, there are varying opinions as to which model is most appropriate for improvement of underperforming schools. Hallinger (2003) claims that high-need turnaround schools respond best to the directive style in the traditional instructional leadership model. Although their work was not limited to turnaround schools, Robinson, et al. (2008), found in their meta-analysis study, a stronger correlation between student outcomes with instructional leadership than with transformational leadership. On the other hand, Leithwood (1994) states that for school restructuring, which is often the strategy used for turnaround, transformational leadership is needed and that instructional leadership is not enough to transform the organization. Potter, et al. (2002) also advocate for a transformational approach coming from the leadership team in order to improve schools that face challenging circumstances. A study by Giles, Johnson, Brooks, and Jacobson (2005) of how an elementary principal turned around a failing school through transformational leadership illuminates some of the effects of the transformational model on turnaround work. According to this study, the transformational framework explained what the principal did and how that was effective; however, it did not explain why her contribution created a productive school culture. Notable was that the success of the school was based on the fact that the principal

was able to build a supportive, caring and trusting relationships, that the principal was accessible and listened to advocate for one model over the other. While some may consider one model stronger for turnaround than another, Hallinger (2003) and Marks and Printy (2003) consider the integration of both models, rather than using one approach, to most effectively contribute to school improvement.

The literature has highlighted several leadership practices, under the umbrellas of the transformational and instructional leadership models, which are effective in improving school performance. Some key characteristics of such leadership include a focus on teaching and learning, capacity-building and vision-setting. Also important are fostering a culture of trust and loyalty through relationship-building, emphasizing collaboration in decision-making and problem-solving, and establishing high expectations. Yet, as leaders are responding these days to policy mandates, this work of improving schools could be influenced by the policy. This researcher seeks to understand the work of a principal and their school leadership team that is exercising turnaround work in the context of implementing turnaround policy. Aligned with the theoretical framework of the overall study, this section examines how school leadership team members make sense of the turnaround policy and how that influences their implementation of it.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual frame of policy sense-making of the larger study applies to this section and all areas of the previously described frame will be considered. One area in particular though that may affect school leaders' understanding of policy is their knowledge around effective school leadership. The larger study notes that part of policy sense-making involves a reconstruction of knowledge where new policy information encounters previous knowledge and

experience, resulting in a newly constructed understanding of the policy (Spillane, et al., 2006). For school leaders, existing knowledge may include many different aspects of school practice. However, one facet that may be prominent here is what they already have come to understand about effective school leadership practices, particularly when turning around chronically underperforming schools. The literature review above points to the plethora of experts in the field who have articulated ways to turn around a struggling school. This knowledge could impact how they interpret the turnaround policy and the actions and decisions needed to implement it.

Another area that may be significant in policy sense-making is the context of the school in which that policy is implemented and how the school leaders understand that context in light of the need for school improvement. Again, as previously described, Datnow (2006) emphasizes the important role of context in policy sense-making in that one's understanding of a given policy is shaped by the environment that surrounds them. This part of the sense-making theory may be salient. Given the challenging conditions of chronically underperforming schools, as outlined in the above literature review of the larger study, the environmental factors of a turnaround school where a turnaround policy requires specific practices to be exercised could have particular influence on how a principal interprets the policy. The school leaders have a prominent role in the implementation of a turnaround plan and their actions taken to implement the work would occur in light of the school context.

When considering the context relative to the policy, a key practice of leadership for school improvement involves diagnosing the context of the underperforming school. Some of the work of turnaround may involve some level of school change, whether that is small change or complete school redesign. Because school contexts differ and the leadership approach depends on that context, diagnosing the conditions of the school is key to knowing what leadership



practices are needed for such change (Copland, 2003; Day, et al., 2009; Murphy, 2010; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; Spillane & Coldren, 2011). Spillane and Coldren (2011) say that school leaders need to adopt a diagnosis mindset to identify the nature of problems in the school for potential redesign. They claim that this process of diagnosing and redesigning is ongoing, is focused on the technical core of teaching and learning, and encompasses the multidimensional nature of instruction. Copland (2003) calls this diagnosing and rediagnosing a cycle of inquiry to help the school investigate and respond to problems in the school. He depicts the steps needed to move from narrowing the question for investigation, to identifying measurable goals, to implementing a particular action and analyzing results from the action taken. Murphy and Meyers (2008) further underscore the importance of this diagnosis, as that process will identify what undermines the progress of the organization in order to address it and move the school forward in its improvement efforts. Because every school context is different, perhaps requiring different leadership approaches, deciding on the approach relies on the work of diagnosis of the issues are either helping or hindering school performance.

The literature suggests that wherever the direction of improvement goes, diagnosing the context of the school informs that direction and helps to map out the strategies for improvement. For school leaders, diagnosing their context for school improvement is integral to their work. With a policy in place that dictates how to implement turnaround work, the practice of diagnosis could be influenced by how school leaders interpret the policy, which in turn may impact how they engaged in the work of turning around a chronically underperforming school. Here is where the gap in research exists. Prior research has already outlined effective school leadership that leads to school improvement. Yet, the majority of studies were not necessarily responding to policy mandates. This section of the research aims to address this gap between what research has

said about effective school leadership practices and what policy says school leadership needs to do to turn around chronically underperforming schools. At the core of this is how school leaders make sense of the policy and in turn makes implementation decisions based on that sense-making.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this section mirrors that of the larger study. Using a single case study design, I examined the role of the school leaders in policy implementation, in terms of how they made sense of the policy. Purposeful sampling was used in selecting the school because it involves intentionally selecting sites to understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). I first chose schools that were currently or had been in the recent past designated a level D school. I then approached the school leaders of those schools to participate in interviews. I ended up interviewing school leaders from two of the schools in the LEA. One had already gone through the turnaround process and, with notable success in turnaround, was recently exited from turnaround status. The other school was recently designation a level D school and was just beginning the turnaround process.

Because I wanted to get a larger sampling of school leaders and I wanted to get input from leaders in schools that may be under the threat of designation, I expanded my sampling from leaders in level C schools, who were in the single-digit percentile. Again, using purposeful sampling, the schools I selected were close to level D designation. The reason for this was to know how they made sense of turnaround policy and process in a level C school that may or may not end up facing level D designation. For those school leaders, the questions asked were about how they understood the policy and what they were doing to improve the school, possible with

the aim to avoid designation. In total, I interviewed 8 school leaders from schools that either were in the process of turnaround or had already gone through it, and from low performing level C schools. There was a unique, unplanned outcome of this sampling, which is that 6 out of the 8 participants were associated with the school that had demonstrated successful turnaround. The limitations of this sampling are addressed in the discussion section.

For the interviews, I began with the protocol and interview questions that we designed as a group for the overall study. Like the umbrella study, I conducted semi-structured interviews using the protocol as a guide, which allows for some spontaneity in asking probing questions while following a line of inquiry (Patton, 2002). I made adjustments to the questions especially when I was interviewing the leaders of the level C schools. The nature and ideas of the questions were the same; however, there were wording changes to accommodate the different situations of the level C schools.

Beyond the interviews, I also used observations, both formal and informal. My informal observations were done when I visited the schools for the interviews, following Yin's (2009) description of casual data collection that come from site visits during interviews. I conducted one formal observation, which was of the local stakeholders group meeting for the recently designated level D school. This was a public meeting, which is a requirement of the turnaround legislation. For this observation, I took field notes using the observation protocol that we developed as a group for the overall study. Included in the field notes were descriptions of what occurred and was said along with my commentary. This is consistent with what Creswell (2012) notes as important to observation field notes, descriptive and reflective elements.

The data analysis part of the methodology focused on school leaders where I examined data that spoke to how they made sense of and implemented the turnaround policy. This was

done through coding the interviews and identifying the major themes. As part of the larger study, coding involved a start list, which helped to guide analysis and was created before data collection begins (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The research team also engaged in a collaborative approach to coding, using Hill et al.'s (1997) consensual qualitative research as a guide to initial coding in order to achieve some calibration. This collaborative coding began with our start list, which we revised when we started coding, because we found that some of the original codes did not encompass all the ideas that were presented in the interviews. Once we established our parent codes, I coded for school leadership sense-making and implementation. I extracted the major themes from the data that helped to explain how members of the leadership team made sense of the policy and what they focused on for turnaround implementation. One area that I particularly looked at was the interaction between what members of the leadership team understood to be effective leadership practices and the requirements of turnaround policy and how this interaction influenced how they implemented turnaround.

As a practicing administrator, my bias filtered in. I have had previous experience in a level D school and have been involved in the implementation of some requirements of the turnaround legislation. I have seen initial impact of receiving the level D designation, labeling the school a “turnaround school”. Currently, I work in a level C school where there is continuous pressure to keep the achievement data from dropping in order to avoid level D status. With this experience, I have a lens that includes positive and negative views of the turnaround policy and process and that may have influenced data collection and analysis. There was the risk of projecting onto the interviewees what I experienced in my past turnaround situation. With this awareness of my bias, I tried to be careful not to impose interpretations on the data that were not evident in the data itself. The steps outlined in the broader research study, including the

collaborative coding and Miles and Huberman's (1994) tactics to ensure data quality and rigorous assessment of data analysis, helped to mitigate this bias.

## **Findings**

This section describes the findings that emerged from the interviews and observational information around school leaders' sense-making and implementation of turnaround policy. Findings show that sense-making occurs among school leaders around policy requirements. Yet, their sense-making goes beyond the specific requirements to other parts of the turnaround, including expectations, their role as school leaders, and data. Findings also show that school leaders exercise specific strategies and leadership moves when implementing turnaround work. This analysis articulates a relationship between their sense-making and what they do to turn around a chronically underperforming school. School leaders' sense-making and implementation primarily centers on three categories, policy requirements, diagnosis, and effective practice. Within each of these categories are areas of practice on which school leaders focus their school improvement efforts. Following this is an analysis of findings of what influences, or even facilitates, that sense-making. This section highlights what school leaders make sense of when faced with the task of leading turnaround efforts, how they make sense of it and what they do to raise the school's performance.

### **Sense-making of Policy Requirements and Its Impact on Implementation**

School leaders in this LEA made turnaround implementation decisions at least partly from how they understood turnaround policy. This was an important part of sense-making that typically occurred at the beginning of the process as they asked key questions around the policy

requirements that influenced their turnaround implementation decisions. This appeared in two primary areas: hiring and organizing staff and utilizing resources.

**Sense-making of policy requirements informs hiring and organizing staff.** One of the more widely cited areas of turnaround implementation in the interviews was hiring and organizing staff. This part of implementation started with school leaders' sense-making of policy requirements. With designation, two questions arose about staffing. The first was about what happens to staff upon level D designation according to the policy. One participant talked about how she discussed this question with their staff, noting that from the policy, shifts in staff were possible. However, she did not expand upon the policy requirements that are specifically about staffing. Related to this was a question that emerged about the latitude given by level D status in terms of staffing. One participant noted that "The principal's right to hire and fire becomes much more aggressive and you can let people go." This was echoed by two other participants, who highlighted the latitude around staffing that a principal has with turnaround status. In fact, one participant went so far as to attribute some of the success of turnaround to a leader's ability to move staff as afforded by the policy. The sense-making here was about determining the authority a school leader had via the policy around staffing and how to exercise that authority.

Part of this sense-making involved the impact on staff when a school leader had latitude with staffing. For example, one participant noted that the policy questions came up with staff "when they're afraid about jobs, about losing their job." This topic also came up in the local stakeholders group meeting where members discussed the process and impact of opting out, noting that there were contract issues at play with how the opt-out works. Here, participants' understanding of the policy involved questions about how that policy interacts with the employment contract. Opting out is a process where either the teacher requests a transfer out of

the school and/or the principal “opts out” a staff member. One member of the local stakeholders group spoke about how teachers should opt out if it is right for them, but that they need to know that they will still be taken care. The sense-making around staffing for school leaders centered on what authority they had to move staff and how that affected the staff in their buildings.

These questions around staffing related to the policy informed the staffing decisions school leaders made to turn around their schools. Where all participants discussed staffing as part of their efforts to raise the performance of their schools, one participant embodied the role of hiring and staffing in turnaround when she stated that it is important to “...get the people on the right bus and get people in the right seats and all of that. It is that.” Four participants specifically noted that the beginning of the turnaround process involved a lot of staff turnover. As described earlier, the beginning of the process includes an “opting-out” stage. Yet, as noted by one participant, staff turnover was not necessarily due to the removal of staff by the principal, but also resulted from resignation and retirement. With turnover in staff, the question that emerged for school leaders was about finding the people who would be able to carry out the work of turning around the school. One participant talked about the need to make sure the person is a good fit.

...if the visions don't match, if you're not at that place in your career, or maybe you have family that you just can't take all this on right now, that's okay. So I have to keep telling them it's not the ... it's not personally why we ask somebody to change or move people around; it's what's going to fit best and people that can do this work...they're beginning to see the hard work that we're going to be assigned to for four years, and not everybody's up for that, and not everybody can handle it and that's okay, too.

This school leader emphasized that their work of raising performance of underperforming schools required staff who were a good fit not only for the vision of the school but also who were ready for the intensity of turnaround work. This was echoed by three other participants, who agreed that the fit was about whether the person could support the vision and had the skills and knowledge needed for turnaround work. In this case, implementation involved seeking the personnel that would help move the school forward.

This then led to the question about what characteristics school leaders looked for in teachers for a turnaround school. The school leaders interviewed in this study largely spoke about teachers' instructional practice to know if they would be able to increase student learning. The kind of instruction sought is discussed in more detail later about instructional focus and capacity building. Yet, there are other characteristics that appeared to have had an influence on school leaders' judgments about who was and was not a good fit. The school leader who gave the above quote noted that not everyone could manage the hard work of turnaround, suggesting that there was an element of resilience that was needed among the staff of a turnaround school, because the work was so demanding. Another characteristic that came up in the teacher interviews centered on teachers' focus on and care for the students. One teacher described how their principal, during the initial stages of turning around the school, chose staff purposefully.

It doesn't mean they're all lovey-dovey with them but the kids gravitate. We were told cultivate your group of kids in terms of giving them an adult in the building, aside from a guidance counselor or school adjustment counselor.

This teacher went on to emphasize the connections adults in the building needed to foster with students when she said, "you have to like kids and you have to care about what's going to happen to them, not just academically". Here, the teachers' building caring relationships with



students was key. This teacher saw this as a factor in one school leader's staffing decisions and noted that if teachers did not align themselves with these priorities, they were likely not going to be asked to stay at the school.

Looking for talent applied not only to the beginning stages of turnaround but also once turnaround success was reached. Two participants discussed the need to seek out talent to help sustain the effectiveness of a high performing school and that looking for quality teachers did not end once success was attained. One school leader further noted that it was critical to create strong teams through key staffing decisions, especially with building leadership teams that would carry on the work of sustaining school performance. With the understanding that a school that has reached high levels of success through turnaround may still be considered vulnerable, staffing was seen as a key component to ensuring that the school remained at a high level of performance.

Staffing was also a factor in school improvement in low performing level C schools that may have level D designation on their horizon. Participants spoke about limited flexibility in terms of moving staff in and out of their buildings. How school leaders responded to this differed. Two participants noted that the lack of staffing in their schools hindered their ability to address certain needs of students. One participant saw it as an impediment, noting that low staffing forced her to deal with operational issues on a daily basis, detracting from her time to spend on instructional improvements. On the other hand, two participants discussed how they were moving staff in positions that would lead to increased performance, given a lack of authority around staffing. One of these participants spoke about converting positions.

I have to use whatever resources I have so I used those as conversions and I'll do it again this year because that's the only power I have around positions.

This school leader went on to give an example of what he takes into consideration around conversions.

Which ones do I need to hire back in the positions for English because I need the English teacher and which ones can I convert to positions I know we need? I converted two, one to a science department chair which I'm the only school that has that in the middle school, and a fulltime IT, instructional technology integration facilitator full time.

This school leader looked at the needs of the school, based on the data and current staffing, and made decisions around how to move positions and staff members. Seeing that the science data was faltering, he determined that a science department head was an important position in order to better support science instruction. He also saw increasing the use of technology as potentially having a needed impact on learning. Where level D staffing authority and/or additional staffing is unavailable, assigning staff to positions and/or converting positions became a move school leaders took to put the right people in place in order to better meet the needs of students.

Information from the interviews illustrated that school leaders' priority in raising the performance of their school was in the staffing, whether it was through hiring or through reorganizing positions and staff, and at least some of these decisions were influenced by their understanding of policy requirements. School leaders saw staffing as a critical part of school improvement because they saw the importance of making sure the right people are in place for the challenging work of turning around an underperforming school. Their decisions about how to staff their schools were about finding the right "fit". The core of these decisions was about what would best improve instruction in all classrooms. This included consideration of how a teacher

would be able to handle the difficult work of turnaround and how much they would focus on the needs of the students.

**Sense-making of policy requirements informs utilization of resources.** Another element of turnaround that emerged from the interviews was the availability and utilization of resources. All participants spoke about the key role resources had in enabling the work of turning around a school and some of their sense-making stemmed from what the policy said about resources. More specifically, one question that came up through the interviews was the extent to which successful turnaround depended on the availability of the resources that came with level D designation. In this case, resources meant additional funding for programs. School leaders who had gone through the work of turning around a school agreed that the resources were helpful in allowing them to provide educational opportunities for students that they might not otherwise have been able to provide. One participant expressed this in the interview.

I know that this school there were resources in place, and it shouldn't always come down to money, but a lot of times it does. Do you have the resources to do the work that's needed? So when you look at redesign, when you look at a wraparound zone, when you look at extended learning time, the state invested quite a bit. It wasn't like they said, okay, you're level D, you've got to fix it, and see you later. Let us know when it's done. By the way, we're coming back in three years and the work better be done. They did provide some resources to get to do the work.

This school leader emphasized key questions a turnaround leader has, which are about whether the resources will be there to support the work of improving the school, and felt that the state recognized the need for such resources. Three other participants echoed this sentiment around the

advantage of having additional resources in turnaround, noting how it provided opportunities the schools might not have otherwise had. Namely these opportunities were the extended learning time and the wraparound zone programs, which have been associated with the turnaround work. Participants noted that the funding supported the implementation of these programs in the turnaround schools.

On the other side of this was the impact on performance when resources were lacking, namely human resources. Two participants expressed the pressure they had felt in situations where staffing was not enough, leading to the need to overuse existing staff to fill in. The lack of staffing in one school according to the school leader, did not allow him to put enough time into giving instructional feedback to teachers because he spent more time addressing immediate operational issues that arose in the school day. This school leader, seeing resources getting funneled to turnaround schools, viewed this as a disparity of resource distribution across schools and expressed feeling challenged by it.

Yet, there was also a feeling that turnaround work was possible without the level of funding that comes with level D designation. Five participants agreed that it was possible to turn around an underperforming school without the additional funding. As one school leader put it, “You don’t have the money and the resources that come with the turnaround but that’s okay,” referring to practices that can be implemented without additional funding. Another participant expressed a similar opinion and defined such practices.

It’s certainly a lot tougher, but I think it can be done....Certain parts of the formula that don’t involve additional resources you can implement, you know, in the school. Those, of course, make it even easier, and you really build your staff up even more.

This school leader pointed out that certain practices that go into turning around an underperforming school can be implemented even without additional funding. Specifically, he spoke about practices of collaboration, looking at data, and improving instruction in the classroom. Resources helped with turnaround; however, the interviews suggested that it came down to the kinds of practices that were implemented with or without those resources. This is what sense-making centered on. School leaders looked to policy requirements to answer questions about what resources were available; however, their sense-making centered on the what resources were needed and how to use existing resources within the building.

This sense-making around the resources informed decisions about how to best utilize the resources that were available as part of implementation of turnaround. Three participants mentioned the advantage the resources that came with level D designation had in setting up wraparound programs, extended learning time, and enrichment for students. The wraparound program was key in addressing the social/emotional needs of students. Resources to support this included staffing and funding for the wraparound zone and the organization of staff into teams to coordinate social and emotional supports.

This is a wraparound zone school. We have a wellness coordinator. I have...sacs [school adjustment counselors] and we work it. That's the term we use. We work it and we surround issues. If kids are having issues, they're going to be in front of the V.P. They're going to be in front of a...sac [school adjustment counselor]. It's not one or the other. We just kind of come around it, surround it, and figure out the best way of dealing with it and address the behaviors.

The school leader described the value of the wraparound zone in addressing the social and emotional needs of students. Other participants agreed that the social and emotional supports

were necessary for student learning. In fact, one participant, who talked about a lack of such support in their school, pointed out the impact.

It's the size of my school and the social/emotional needs that my children come with that I don't feel equipped to support. If I can't support them there, if their needs aren't met in that realm they're not ready to learn.

This school leader identified a gap in resources in their school that hindered the school's ability to provide enough supports for the social and emotional needs of their students. Without that funding, she felt it difficult to implement programs to address these needs of students. The interviews suggested that resources that address the social and emotional well-being of students were thought to be valuable in supporting school improvement efforts.

In addition to supporting the wraparound zone, resources that went to level D schools also supported collaboration and professional learning of teachers. Level D schools had the opportunity to implement the extended learning time (ELT) program through grant funding, and with that, were able to add time in their school day. This additional time gave more opportunity for enrichment activities and common planning time. Five participants agreed that the ELT was valuable to their turnaround efforts and credited it for providing more collaborative time to teachers in the form of common planning time. One school leader expressed this when he spoke about common planning time in their school.

The most valuable part about extended learning time isn't the classroom time for the students, it's the planning time for the teachers. We do three common planning times a week plus a common curriculum meeting a week. Two of those meetings are what we call cluster meetings. Those meetings are like we were discussing student progress, behavior.

This school leader further described how teachers used this time to discuss interventions and instruction based on the data. Another participant spoke about this collaborative teacher time increasing with ELT because meetings could then happen more frequently. She described how teachers used the additional common planning time to look at the data and to design instruction.

Enrichment opportunities for students were also provided through ELT. One participant told about the kinds of enrichment that were afforded through the additional funding for ELT.

It provides a lot of opportunities for kids, especially in our economic profile that they wouldn't get a chance. I mean for the kids to go to the Y and go swimming, a lot of these kids would never get a chance to do that or learn to play a musical instrument or play in an orchestra.

Further portraying the impact of ELT, this school leader emphasized the learning in which students could engage beyond the academics in their core content classes. He further described that with ELT, they could offer students courses in science and technology, again which went beyond their regular course work. The school leader stated that these enrichment opportunities happened because of the extra funding for ELT that went with the task of turning around the school.

School leaders' sense-making about the resources centered on what was made available through level D designation, as procured through grant funding. They also thought about questions around how vital those resources were to school improvement efforts for their underperforming schools. From there, school leaders made decisions about how to utilize resources, like establishing wraparound programs and ELT, and about what school improvement strategies could be implemented where resources were either minimal or completely unavailable.

School leaders asked questions about what the policy required and allowed them to do. These were key questions asked early on in the turnaround process. From there, school leaders then furthered their sense-making about turnaround to include a larger lens about what would help move the school forward. This lens included diagnosis of the school's needs and effective practices for school improvement.

### **Diagnosis as Sense-making and Its Impact on Implementation**

When looking at school leaders' understanding of turnaround, findings point to a process of diagnosis that goes into their sense-making, a process that leads to a determination of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The crux of this diagnosis was data. School leaders looked to the data to tell them what needed attention in their turnaround work. In this way, their sense-making centered on the data in terms of how it reflected school performance and it was that understanding of the data that informed their school improvement efforts.

**Data informs diagnosis of the school, which leads to school improvement implementation decisions.** How school leaders used data emerged from the interviews as a critical step in implementing turnaround. All participants agreed that data was an important lever in an underperforming school's ability to raise their performance. Their use of data stemmed from the various ways in which they made sense of it. One part of their sense-making was about what the data revealed about the performance of the school. Three participants discussed examining the data to understand the school's progress, which can be seen in how one participant described their conversations with her staff.

...we had a lot of very open and honest meetings about data, and it's not easy to, as part of those groups, be able to sort of sit there and say 'I guess what we're



doing is not working, or hasn't worked, and try to scratch your head and figure that out.' And you have to...you have to own up to that data.

This school leader's sense-making was about understanding what the assessment results were saying about overall student achievement. Where the school leader mentioned having to "own up to that data", it appeared that she was trying to compel shared ownership over the school's performance. In this way, the data was seen as evidence for the need to improve. Sense-making of school data also emerged in the observation of the local stakeholders group meeting, but centered on attendance data. The group looked at the attendance data and discussed its impact on student learning and the causes of low attendance.

As school leaders worked to understand what the data was saying about their schools overall, more specifically, their sense-making of the data involved an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Three participants discussed how they had been in the midst of diagnosing the school, to identify where to go with their turnaround strategy. One participant described this in the context of the local stakeholders group.

...initially, we formed stakeholder groups, and sort of looked at the school's data and data almost like an analysis and needs assessment for the building in terms of what was going well and what really needed to be improved.

This process of diagnosing was also observed in the local stakeholders group meeting for the school that had recently been designated level D. There, members of the group talked about the strengths of the school that should be kept in place and what still needed to be improved. This then would go into the recommendations for the turnaround plan that was still to be developed. The process of diagnosing also appeared among school leaders of level C schools. They talked

about looking at their schools' areas of need and considered ways to address those needs. This was described by one of the participants.

I consider last year the planning year even though we were in it and we had to stop. We had to make some data move. We had to. I still consider that a lot of that getting a needs assessment, figuring out where we are, who is who, what does the design look like, what are we building. That was essential of the work.

This school leader noted the elements that went into a needs assessment, which involved a diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses. He discussed this in the context of having to raise achievement levels, not only for the sake of increasing student learning, but also to avoid level D designation. For school leaders in this LEA, sense-making of the data entailed a determination of school needs.

As school leaders developed an understanding of the data, they were putting the use of data for improvement planning at the forefront of the work. That is, the practice of analyzing data came to be a significant part of their implementation of turnaround and guided their school improvement planning. Seven out of eight participants described how data was used to inform administrative and teacher teams about school progress overall. These administrative teams dissected the data in order to identify the areas that needed to be addressed through the school improvement plan and/or turnaround plan. One participant spoke about what it looked like to analyze data at the beginning stages of turnaround.

We were part of a lot of planning meetings with the state, frequently, constantly analyzing data, looking, developing sort of benchmarks along the way, more so than you would in a public school that's not in a turnaround process...initially, we formed stakeholder groups, and sort of looked at the school's data and data almost

like an analysis and needs assessment for the building in terms of what was going well and what really needed to be improved.

This school leader articulated how she worked with the team to put data analysis into practice, as a way to assess the needs of the school. This occurred through planning meetings that involved different stakeholders. In particular, she noted how the local stakeholders group engaged in the use of data to help them identify school needs. School leaders in this LEA prioritized the use of data to diagnose school needs in order to inform school improvement strategies. Once improvement strategies were in place, data was then used to measure the effectiveness of those strategies. For example, one school leader talked about how she used the data to look at the impact of their inclusion practices on student learning for all populations and made adjustments to those practices based on what she saw in the data. Input from participants suggested that the use of data for school improvement planning was prevalent and frequent and that school leaders' sense-making of the data involved teams engaging in the process of diagnosing the school.

**Data informs diagnosis of student learning needs, which leads to instructional decisions.** Mirroring the use of data for school wide improvement, data was also used for instructional improvement at the classroom level. Here, sense-making of student achievement data was a precursor to implementing the use of data to inform instruction. Four participants talked about how they needed to understand the learning needs of students in order to know the instruction and intervention that was critical to increase their learning. One participant described the key questions they had asked.

...you know, a typical topic might be, was how did we do on the benchmark last week? Do we have any results yet? And what does the data show? That sort of kind of conversation.

This school leader illustrated the conversations she had around data analysis, which helped her to identify the learning trends of students. The conversation described here reflects the thought processes in which she engaged as part of her understanding of the data. The sense-making of the learning data for instructional purposes here parallels the sense-making of school performance data for the purposes of school improvement planning.

Where sense-making of data occurred around students learning needs, the use of data analysis to inform instruction was prevalent. Seven out of eight participants discussed using data with their staff to inform instruction. As one school leader put it, “...every conversation is data-driven, and it’s about teaching and learning.” Another participant described the process teachers used to examine the data.

So identifying weak strands, grouping around weak strands, teaching to that weakness...The teachers look at data and they group their children based on data and we do that [LEA] wide.

This school leader outlined how teachers used the data to identify the learning needs of students then to group them accordingly. Another school leader gave another example of the kind of conversation that happened around how the data informed instruction.

...if you do this first and then you do this and you do this, it’s going to lead you into better instruction because you can see right here on this piece of paper these two kids don’t know this skill...

The school leader here noted the discussion between teachers around impact of instruction on student learning. The conversations centered on identifying the areas of learning that students had not yet mastered and how that would inform instructional decisions to target specific skills. Here, data played a critical role in changing instruction for the better.

Coupled with improvement strategies, was the use of data to inform professional development in order to impact instruction. Three participants described using data to understand what kinds of instructional skills teachers need to build. One school leader illustrated this in their discussion around how they use the data for professional development.

So, we met as a leadership team. That included teachers. I also met, as a coach, weekly with the principal, as part of the administrative team in the building, and we would analyze not only data from students, but also from teachers: where were teachers in terms of their development, what kind of supports they need,

This reflected how school leadership teams used the data to identify areas for further growth among their staffs and how the leadership needed to support that growth. Where to focus staff development was rooted in the data because it highlighted the areas of student learning that needed improvement.

For these school leaders, using data was an important part of implementing turnaround strategy. Their sense-making of the data was about diagnosing the school's strengths and weaknesses as well as students' learning needs. These two data analysis processes mirrored each other – one at the classroom level and one at the school level. This then informed steps taken to improve instruction specifically and the school overall. In this way, data became central to turnaround implementation efforts.

### **Views of Effective Practice in Sense-making and Implementation**

As school leaders were making decisions about turnaround implementation and diagnosing their school needs based on data, one key element that had a role in these decisions was their beliefs about effective practice. School leaders in this LEA came to the work of school

turnaround with at least some idea of what would or would not work in improving underperforming schools. This knowledge base influenced how they made sense of their current turnaround situation, which in turn impacted how they implemented school improvement efforts. Three areas on which they focused such efforts were instruction, vision, and capacity.

**School leaders kept a focus on instruction.** One of the key leadership moves involved in turnaround as cited by participants was about focusing on instruction. All participants spoke about how their focus on instruction was part of their strategy around school improvement. This stemmed from participants' sense-making around instructional expectations that would lead to improved school performance. One participant explained that a focus on instruction meant demanding certain instructional practices of their teachers and making those practices consistent among the faculty. In thinking about the state and/or LEA expectations, another participant articulated the kind of instruction she understood to be effective in increasing student learning.

...here are some common structures across rooms. It's not identical. It's not to clone people but we might agree to a common agenda, template or a pattern, method in the classroom of how we transition.

She went on to talk about what the classroom would look like.

With that said, instructionally you have student centered classrooms. There's student-to-student talk, variety of arrangements of seating that demonstrates the effort of learning, the different models of learning in classrooms.

This school leader expressed an understanding of effective instructional practices that she believed would result in high levels of student learning, including student-to-student talk and various seating arrangements. She also saw the need to make these practices consistent across classrooms, which were critical to in making sure all students were receiving quality instruction,

while at the same time giving room for teachers to make decisions about their instructional practice. Here emerged a tension between making practices consistent and allowing some autonomy to teachers. This sense-making around the instructional expectations, with the tension between consistency and autonomy, influenced how school leaders' prioritized instruction in their turnaround strategy.

When implementing turnaround, school leaders found ways to keep the focus on instruction. Three participants emphasized the hands-on approach in facilitating teacher growth. In general, according to one participant, this included looking at lesson plans, visiting classrooms, and giving feedback. More specifically, he talked about examining lesson plans and giving feedback on those plans, which the staff had not been used to, but which helped as a starting point to know what needed improvement in the planning phase of instruction. Another school leader described the importance of classroom visits.

I think a lot of that, when we talk about the instructional piece, was the fact that they [administrators] were constantly in classrooms. There were learning walks going on.

Here, the school leader highlighted the approach needed in to keep the focus on instruction that involved constantly looking at teacher practice through class visits and giving feedback for improvement. Three participants connected this with holding teachers accountable. When talking about the beginning stages of turnaround, one participant explained that in their school, this accountability was important.

...it was strategic, but it was very... it was hard-core. They were on teachers, holding them accountable, you know, behaviors of students... it really was just the management that they needed at the time.

This school leader described how, at the initial stages of turnaround, building leadership exercised close monitoring of teacher practice as way to hold faculty accountable. Comments from participants alluded to the controlling style a leader may use at the beginning of turnaround in order to make practices consistent across classrooms. One participant acknowledged using this style when, at the beginning, he embarked upon their work of turning around their school. Overall, information from interviews suggested that the focus on instruction was most relevant to the initial turnaround stages. Yet, two participants noted though that at the point of sustaining school performance, this focus on instruction was also important. They acknowledged the need to maintain instructional quality and not to let people become complacent.

One of the teachers interviewed revealed the impact of this focus on instruction on their practice. One teacher articulated how they thought about their classroom.

It pushed me to really think about how a classroom should be set up and what I should be doing better. That is student-to-student teaching, student to student questioning, teacher versus facilitator and how I should be a facilitator and not a teacher.

This illustrated the impact that the monitoring had on one teacher's thinking around their instructional practice. He considered his classroom set up and how he delivered instruction that would most serve the students' needs as learners. Another teacher defined the focus on instruction in their school.

...the instructional focus changed. Rigor. That's one of [school leader's] words, rigor, rigor, rigor, time on learning, time on learning, time on learning.

These two teachers defined what the instructional focus looked like in their schools as promoted by the building leadership. They described how they saw their practice in terms of how it



resulted in student learning and emphasized the level of rigor that building leadership was seeking. This was what the focus was about, having teachers think about how to improve their instruction in order to lead to more effective instructional decisions and to increase student learning.

**School leaders communicated a shared vision.** Another significant part of school turnaround that came out in the interviews was how a school leader communicates a shared vision. Five out of eight participants said that school leadership needed to establish and communicate the vision as part of the implementation of turning around an underperforming school. As one school leader noted, “You are the principal for a reason. Set a vision.” This setting of the vision at least partly stemmed from school leaders’ sense-making of their role of communicating a vision that gives guidance to the staff about what they needed to do to improve performance. Participants largely agreed that communicating a vision that was focused on student learning was important to their work as a turnaround school leader. They elaborated on the purpose of the vision. One participant stated that the vision was what guided the changes, informing staff about how to implement such changes. Another participant noted that it was the vision that got the school moving in the same direction. Yet, another school leader expanded this notion to the LEA, particularly regarding the LEA meetings with school leaders that centered on goal alignment. With an understanding of the purpose of a vision, school leaders made sense of how part of their role was about communicating a vision in the context of school improvement efforts. One participant described how they grappled with this part of his role.

It also has to be, and this is something I’m challenged with. I always felt that I was a good communicator and that the vision I could get that message out and

people would at least understand it. So that was a big ‘aha’ for me coming through year one as a principal...

This school leader was making sense of how he would need to communicate the vision that made his staff understand it. He saw the importance of this as part of his role. Here, school leaders came to understand that vision was important and that the school leader was the one responsible for communicating that vision.

The sense-making around vision went beyond knowing its importance to identifying their own school’s vision in the context of turning around their underperforming school. Two participants defined the vision around what would best lead to student learning. One school leader articulated this in his vision of the school.

...I’m there to fight for those kids and they’re going to get a really good school at the end of these four years. So that’s what keeps me going. So that’s always been me, but now I’m fighting harder. I really have to roll up my sleeves now.

Here, the vision was about the students. It was about creating a school that best served their students. Another school leader described her vision around setting high expectations.

...really if you raise everybody around you, that just raises the level of expectation in the building. I think that’s another piece there, is the expectations you set.

For this school leader, raising expectations was needed to increase performance of the staff, leading to more effective ways of serving students in the school. The vision embodied the kinds of performance expectations to set for staff and students. The sense-making of their role as turnaround leaders involved understanding the vision of their schools as turnaround schools.

The implementation actions related to the sense-making around vision largely involved setting and communicating a vision. In particular, teacher voice was noted as important in setting

the vision. Two participants stated that school leadership needed to get buy-in from teachers regarding the vision so that the vision spreads. One participant talked about the formation of a shared vision.

So you've got to be able to set it as a principal, build your key cogs, I guess, but it can't be you just dictating it. They've got to feel like they have a voice at the table and that they're helping to contributing to those mutual decisions so that the vision spreads or else it will always be top down.

This school leader saw that the teacher input in the process was significant. He noted that vision that was imposed without input from teachers would be difficult to spread. To make the vision spread, the staff needed to be involved in establishing it, under the guidance of school leadership. This suggests that collaboration has a place in setting a vision. School leaders agreed on the importance of communicating a shared vision. In this LEA, sense-making of their role as setting and communicating a vision in an underperforming school influenced decisions they made around what the vision of the school should be and how to get teacher buy-in for that vision.

**School leaders built capacity of their teachers.** With a focus on instruction and a vision about raising school performance, school leaders then turned to capacity building as critical in school turnaround. This centered on building teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills. The sense-making that went into school leaders' decisions about capacity building include two key elements: sense-making of expectations and of their role. Seven out of eight participants discussed how they were trying to determine LEA and state expectations. Indeed, working through their understanding of LEA and state expectations occupied much of their sense-making, which came in the form of questions what was needed to either exit out of or avoid level D

designation. A frequently stated question was about benchmarks that the LEA and state wanted to see for a school to reach, as described by one participant.

I know where I want to go, but I don't know what their expectation's going to be for the growth, and benchmarking, and stuff like that, so I think once I know that it might inform me...

This school leader was trying to figure out what the state was looking for in terms of achievement data. He did not yet know what those expectations were but knew they would be key in his implementation of turnaround because those expectations defined the school's criteria to exit level D status, and the school's ability to move out of level D, depended largely on the instructional practice in each of the classrooms. Similarly, six participants stated that they were trying to determine their achievement goals in order to know whether or not they are reaching appropriate achievement levels. This endeavor to understand the benchmarks applied not only to level D schools, but also to level C schools. In those schools, leaders expressed this question in light of the fact that they were close to level D designation and wanted to know the achievement levels needed to avoid designation. One participant discussed how he was keeping an eye on the achievement scores for her school.

So our challenge was can we continue in 20 point increments? I don't expect to go from 40 to 80 is such a drastic jump. I'd love it and if we do it that would be grand but at least when we laid out the school improvement plan we're thinking about 20. So 20 to 40, 40 to 60, 60 to 80 and that would be a three-year plan to get us on track.

Here, the school leader was calculating the progress he could make that would be considered enough progress to avoid level D designation. This reflected the significance of academic targets

for school leaders to measure the extent to which their school was improving, usually with the aim to either exit or avoid level designation. Because school leaders' ability to move the school out of turnaround status depended primarily on instruction, the teachers' ability to implement effective instruction became a critical part of turnaround. Where school leaders were asking questions about the achievement expectations of the school, they were also looking at how to improve instruction, via capacity building efforts, in order to meet those expectations.

Sense-making around benchmarks and goals then set up these school leaders to target their professional development efforts, focusing on instruction, in their implementation of turnaround. One participant noted that meetings with school leadership and with staff "centered around instruction, and also planning for professional development." With benchmarks in the foreground of turnaround, school leaders made teacher development a priority in their turnaround efforts. In particular, training teachers at the beginning of turnaround was critical to increasing school performance, according to two participants. Here, the school leaders considered the design of their professional development program that would help their teachers improve. One school leader embodied this notion that training and professional development were important, especially during the initial phases of turnaround.

...if you have a coordinated professional development plan that's based on data, whether it's deficits or strengths, then you do have a chance for changing the way instruction is delivered, and unless you change the way instruction is delivered, then nothing else is going to change.

There, the school leader acknowledged that as learning depended on instruction, instruction was at the center of school improvement. For the school to improve, instruction needed to improve, leading to increases in student learning.

One area of capacity building that received particular attention was data analysis, which as noted above, is an important part of instructional improvement. Noting that staff capacity to analyze data was inconsistent, three participants spoke about the need for teachers to learn how to analyze data and to use that analysis to inform their instruction. One school leader discussed how she provided opportunities for her staff to learn more about data.

Every teacher with an account has met with me at some point for at least a half hour, 45 minutes, sort of orientation training on just how to access data in the system, and then weekly in common planning with the coach, department head, or myself, we will analyze both formative assessment as well as benchmark data. And we'll sort of walk teachers through that process, so we'll do a real detailed item analysis.

Here, the school leader talked about helping her staff access and navigate the data system. With that in place, she then used the common planning time to increase teachers' understanding about what the data was saying about the students' learning and what was needed by way of instruction. This school leader pointed out that the schools had data teams and that teachers and administrators attended trainings in the LEA about how to use the data to inform instruction. Data analysis came out in the interviews as an important part of teacher development because of the importance of it in the instructional process. This data is tied to the sense-making around expectations by way of benchmarks and achievement goals. It was this sense-making that influenced school leaders to make capacity building around data analysis and instruction a priority through focused professional development opportunities.

Another area of sense-making that led to decisions around capacity building was about the role of the school leader. Four of the participants saw part of their role as reducing anxiety of

staff. Upon designation of level D status, one school leader found himself trying to lower staff anxiety, which largely stemmed from not knowing what would happen as a result of the turnaround work, particularly with regard to their job status.

So I feel my role [was] to try to keep the peace and help everybody as much as I can and keep it moving forward because that can kind of stop everything and I [didn't] want it to, so it's being like the cheerleader...what I feel my role is.

This school leader identified his role as providing emotional support for staff through the tension of the initial stages of turnaround, tension that centered on the uncertainty that surrounds level D designation. Similarly, this encouragement of staff also occurred with one of the school leaders in a level C school, where, in anticipation of potential level D designation, tried to decrease staff anxiety by giving them positive verbal feedback for the work they were doing. It appeared that the role of the school leader to reduce anxiety more often occurred either prior to designation, where the school was close to being eligible for turnaround status, and/or right after designation. These participants saw at least part of their role as attending to the emotional responses of their staff.

Contrasting this idea of assuaging teachers' anxiety, school leaders also spoke about applying pressure to faculty to improve. As part of their sense-making of their role, the question about how much pressure a school leader should apply to improve performance while building confidence came up by three participants. This was an ongoing question, and as one school leader noted, she would see if they needed to push more or less as they moved forward through the process.

I don't think I'll ever change my leadership style or my belief system, but I either might have to push harder or go in a little bit of a different direction in the way I'm doing things.

Here, the school leader was trying to figure out how much and what kind of pressure staff would need to increase performance. Another school leader discussed how he approached the turnaround work at the beginning of the process with full pressure on the staff to improve instruction as he went in “in a controlling way”. This suggested that for this school leader, the question of how much pressure to apply was already answered and he had a clear idea that pressure was needed to improve instruction. At the same time, this same leader saw his role to “support and enable them [their staff]”, which goes back to the prioritization of building capacity. Interviews showed that this question around pressure is one that school leaders asked themselves in the work of turning around a school as they try to balance between improving instruction and making sure staff felt supported.

School leaders' understanding of their role in attending to teachers' emotional responses to school improvement efforts at least partly influenced their approach in developing teacher practice in their schools. One school leader put professional learning in the hands of the teachers by having staff-led professional development sessions and teacher-led book study groups around effective teaching practice. Again, this is connected to the aim of lowering anxiety as they wanted teachers to have a voice and a sense of control in how their own development as teachers. Another school leader used faculty meetings for differentiated professional development for teachers instead of general business. Three participants discussed attempting to use reflection and collaboration to grow their teachers. However, one participant encountered challenges in encouraging her staff to be reflective.



...my teachers still feel very, any feedback they view negatively. So we're working hard. My staff is working hard to overcome that and try to help them take it more objectively in looking at their own practice to help our kids learn better.

The difficulty here was helping teachers feel comfortable examining their own practice with the question of improvement at the forefront. Here, there was an element of risk-taking at play where teachers may not have felt comfortable taking such risks of critically analyzing their own practice. Similarly, two participants expressed challenges in having teachers visit each other's classrooms because they were less inclined to expose their practice to others, even for non-evaluative purposes. With the understanding that the teachers felt this to be a risky endeavor, the school leaders took this slowly, taking small steps towards this practice. They aimed to increase teacher comfort with the process of examining their practice with their colleagues, rather than pushing them into it too soon. It was clear that despite these struggles, school leaders were attempting to primarily draw on collaboration and reflection to develop their teachers, and had to balance putting pressure on teachers with making them feel comfortable taking such risks in their instructional practice.

There were two notable ways that school leaders made decisions about capacity building that emerged from their sense-making. First, understanding around benchmarks and achievement goals led school leaders to look at how they were training their teachers to implement the instructional practices that would move the school towards those goals. This included building teachers' skills in data analysis that would inform instruction. The second way was how school leaders understood their role in terms of calming staff emotional responses to the turnaround status versus putting pressure on teachers to improve their practice. School leaders in this LEA

worked to find a balance between challenge and support. They took steps to increase teachers' comfort levels with specific practices to which they had been unaccustomed to using, while applying pressure to push for needed changes in practice.

### **Influences on Sense-Making**

Another question asked when going into this study was about how school leaders made sense of the policy. That is, what influences them as they try to understand their role, expectations, policy requirements and the data? There were three primary influences on this sense-making: Communication, background knowledge, and school context.

**Communication facilitates sense-making.** Probably one of the more prevalent influences on school leaders' sense-making was communication. It appeared to have influenced all areas of sense-making and implementation, policy requirements, diagnosis, and effective practices. Six out of eight participants discussed the kinds of communication they had in understanding the process of turning around their school. This communication occurred with people from the state, including state representatives to the LEA, redesign coaches, and state partners, particularly at the beginning of the turnaround process. Some of this communication was about determining steps to take to improve school performance and about the school's goals and benchmarks. For example, one participant talked about her conversations with their state representative.

...the state representative on the stakeholders groups, has become my partner and [they] comes over once a week, [they] gives me the intricacies of what's going on and kind of...we just...[they] calls it thought partners, so I tell [them] what I'm

thinking and things I want to do, and we kind of makes sense of that and prioritize, and then I roll that out to the staff.

This description of the communication between the school leader and the state partner illustrated how that communication helped this school leader to analyze their current turnaround situation and to determine what steps were needed in the process. They talk about what is required according to the policy along with areas to look at for school improvement.

Other kinds of communication, between school leaders in this LEA, focused on measuring progress made in the turnaround efforts and further steps needed. This communication helped to facilitate the diagnosis in which school leaders were engaging. One participant noted that regular principals meetings with central office personnel, which centered on goal alignment for improvement across the LEA, was a place for this communication.

...principal's meetings and other gatherings of leaders there has been conversation about goal alignment and at the same time looking within our own schools to see where the weaknesses are and how that all aligns and then putting efforts in place to turn it...

Here, the school leader's description of the conversations at the meetings demonstrate that through this communication, school leaders were making sense of what was needed to improve their schools throughout the LEA. This communication aided school leaders' analysis of school strengths and weaknesses, which as discussed earlier, was the backbone of school improvement efforts.

Communication also occurred between school leaders and stakeholders in the LEA about strategies that would successfully result in school improvement. One participant noted that she communicated with other principals in successful turnaround schools, which helped her to

understand strategies that have been proven effective. This was also observed in the Local Stakeholders Group as members discussed what one school did that led to successful increases in student achievement, with the building leader of that school present. However, another participant in his interview expressed a different perspective on this kind of sharing, noting that the sharing of practices between school leaders was minimal in the LEA. Nevertheless, school leaders of level D and level C schools were communicating with different people, which appeared to influence how they understood the process, how they diagnosed their school needs, and what effective strategies they identified that would likely increase school performance.

More commonly, school leaders communicated with their staffs, communication which was mostly one-way, from leadership to staff. Much of this was about the data in terms of how it explained the school's designation. One prevalent question that came out in the interviews was about how a school is designated level D, with three participants raising this question. Most relevant to school leaders who were either at the beginning of the process or before the process began (e.g. in level C schools), this question highlighted the criteria that makes a school eligible for level D status. Participants discussed how they communicated and explained designation to their staffs, including a look at their data to know either why their school was designated or why it could be designated in the near future.

Well, we went over the policy with them. I didn't know ... I know what the policy is, but I went over it with the teachers, but then I went over like on how they designate us as a Level D.

Another participant echoed this when she described how people were talking about designation.

There's a lot of conversation about what happens if you get into D. So there is lots of conversation about that and my school is very close to becoming a level D school.

One school leader also spoke about how he helped their staffs understand designation.

We do talk about this...how schools are chose, from what percent, and then we...I have informed teachers about the different turnaround models as well.

Communicating about the data to explain how a level D designation might occur, one participant gave an example of what this conversation looked like.

I said this can fall because if we get another 20 and how that gets averaged and all of that and they [the staff] had no sense of how that worked. So that was the first thing I did was put that data up and explained to them what this 20 means and how long we live with this 20.

Here, the participant from a level C school described how she examined the data relative to how the school could become eligible for level D status, pointing out the 4-year trend that is included in the pupil performance index (PPI), as part of the status calculation of the school. These conversations with staff occurred frequently to help staff understand the rationale for the status of their school. This appeared to be an important piece for leaders because it helped them increase staff understanding of the criteria, which led to answering their questions about why their particular school is a turnaround school. Here the sense-making around the criteria for level D designation occurred through communication between school leaders and their staffs. That is, school leaders helped to facilitate sense-making about the data through this communication.

Communication played a significant role in facilitating sense-making of school leaders in this LEA. It contributed to their understanding of policy requirements, it helped them diagnose

their schools' strengths and weaknesses, and it facilitated their exploration of effective practices that would lead to school improvement.

**School leaders use background knowledge from previous experience with turnaround.** Another notable influence came from background knowledge that was cultivated through previous experience with turning around an underperforming school. Where school leaders had previous experience with turnaround, they often used knowledge gained from that experience around effective turnaround practices. Seven out of the eight participants spoke about how they drew on previous turnaround experience to understand their current turnaround situation. Three participants described how their experience helped them to understand what it took to turn around a school. One participant went so far as to call her previous experience as “training ground” for turnaround work, noting the value of this training-like experience.

...Given that I have that perspective, and I know what the state is looking for in terms of what's required for a school to move out of level D status, that's very helpful to me here as a principal...

For this school leader, the insight on turnaround work she gained through previous experience helped her to make sense of her current work of improving an underperforming school and meeting state requirements. This then led her to identify the steps necessary for school improvement. A central office staff member, in his interview, echoed this when he was speaking about one of the principals in the district who turned around one of the underperforming schools. He told about the impact previous turnaround experience had on their subsequent turnaround work.

She had already been through the process once before. Her turnaround time was probably less than half of what it took to turnaround [the previous school]. It was

still the same hard work, still the same things need to happen. But in some ways I would say she had some resources at her disposal that she was ready to use and more prepared to use whether it became modifying bargaining agreements to change the hours of the school or to get teacher enlistment or to remove ineffective teachers or to transfer them out of the building, whatever those things were. I think she was more ready to use them seeing the process that she had went through

This description of the impact of previous experience demonstrated that the knowledge gained through such experience was key to successful turnaround because they began the work already knowing the steps that were needed. He articulated how the experience prepared that school leader especially with knowing effective utilization of resources, staffing and implementation of extended learning time.

The value of knowledge gained through previous experience was in how they understood their role and practices that would lead to school improvement. One participant noted that his experience allowed him to approach his current work with lessened anxiety because he knew what it looked like to turn around a school.

I have the advantage of having been in a failing [LEA]...not only a failing school, a failing [LEA], and seeing it come out on the other side. My particular building was here, then it became a commended school, so I've been through that transformation and I know how good it is on the other side, so that helps me.

With an understanding of the process, this school leader could see how to reach needed outcomes, and knew what success was like. This helped him approach the work with less anxiety

around the process than if he had not had that experience. In fact, he was quite motivated for the work.

I'm a fighter by nature, so this is a challenge for me that I'm going to beat it, I'm going to win kind of thing, and that's the way I go into this every single day.

Here, the school leader described how he approached the turnaround work as a challenge that he could overcome. This motivation appeared to have come at least partly from his having experienced success as a turnaround leader.

Expanding on this, participants talked about their previous experience in terms of how it helped them to identify various effective practices in turnaround. Namely, one school leader noted the importance of teacher collaboration as a means to improve instruction. Two other school leaders saw that communicating a shared vision was an important turnaround practice. Another school leader found, through his experience, that it was critical to use data-driven decision-making and to maintain a clear focus on instruction in order to improve an underperforming school. These school leaders, in seeing the success of these practices, made sense of their current turnaround processes through the lens of this previous experience. They took what they learned to see how it might fit in their current turnaround situation. Where previous experience did not exist with policy or turnaround work, school leaders spoke about how that impacted them. When asked about how they came to understand the policy, one participant said that she had to "figured it out". Another participant said that he had to let go of previously held beliefs about practice. For example, he mentioned that he did not believe much in working with data and relied on checklists to measure instructional practice prior to his role in turnaround. Now, in his current turnaround work, he has adopted practices around data analysis to help with turnaround work. As school leaders made sense of their current task of improving an



underperforming school, if they had previous experience with turnaround, that experience helped to facilitate their sense-making of the work at hand. Namely, they leveraged that knowledge around effective practices to know turnaround implementation actions needed. For school leaders in this LEA, background knowledge helped them to know effective practices that would best address the school's needs.

**School leaders consider the school context in their sense-making.** The school context also emerged as an influence of sense-making, although it was not as strong as previous experience and communication. Understanding of the school context most influenced how school leaders diagnosed their schools. Five out of eight participants discussed how they considered the context of their school in determining what turnaround should look like and steps to raise school performance. Two participants stated that understanding what a turnaround school looked like depended on the school context.

So I don't think any turnaround school can look the same. I think it's taking a hard look at yourself, looking at your strengths, looking at your areas of need, and finding ways to meet the areas of need.

Similarly, one participant noted that knowing the kind of leader needed for turnaround depended on the school.

I don't think that there's one set way of doing it. I don't think like you can say, okay, if you're looking for a principal to turn around your middle school, this is the kind of individual you want....Different schools require different personalities.

Different situations require different personalities. Different fits.

These comments point to a perception that this school leader needed to look at what his school was like, its culture and practices, to identify how he should approach the work of turning it

around. One participant gave an example of this when she noted that the teachers in her school were not ready for certain practices, such as observing each other's teaching practice. This came through the earlier analysis about school leaders reducing anxiety around school improvement efforts. Here though, she was looking at the school context to know what approach to take with implementing these practices. She noted that since the teachers had not been used to visiting each other's classrooms, she needed to move slowly on these kinds of practices to help the staff become more accustomed to them. This participant went on to say that one cannot impose a vision developed through previous experience on a building that is not yet ready for that vision. Here is where another tension arose, this one between the knowledge one builds through previous experience, with views on effective practices for turnaround, and the context of their current school. There was a balance these school leaders had to maintain between using the school context in conjunction with their background knowledge of effective practices to make sense of their turnaround work in order to know what steps to take for school improvement.

There's almost this historical lens of, you know, what is this building about, and sort of what are the concerns here. But then you also have new perspectives coming.

Here, the participant articulated the juxtaposition between the history of the building and new ideas coming in and that a leader needed to consider the school context when bringing in new practices. Information from interviews here suggests that context was not as strong an influence on sense-making as background knowledge and communication; however, it had a role in considering the approach a school leader would take to improve the school, where they needed to understand the culture of the building, its strengths and weakness. As noted previously, this role of identifying strengths and weaknesses appeared to be prevalent in school improvement in that

it embodied the need to diagnose the school in order to identify appropriate school improvement efforts. Because contexts differ from school to school, understanding that context informed this important process of diagnosis.

## How Elements of Sense-making Relate to Implementation Decisions

Sense-making begins with the elements that influence school leaders' understanding of the turnaround policy and process. There were three primary influences on sense-making, which led to implementation decisions. Previous experience, which generated background knowledge around school turnaround, communication with other stakeholders and implementers, and consideration of school context all factored into how school leaders understood the policy. Each one of these influences impacted specific areas of sense-making. Working in tandem with each other, these three influences shaped how school leaders thought about their current turnaround situation. Context had a role in the diagnosis of the school. Previous experience had a role in decisions about practices that would be effective in targeting the needs of the school.

Communication was the one influence that impacted all areas of sense-making as school leaders were able to hear input from other stakeholders and implementers.

Figure 2: The Relationship Between Sense-making and Implementation Decisions

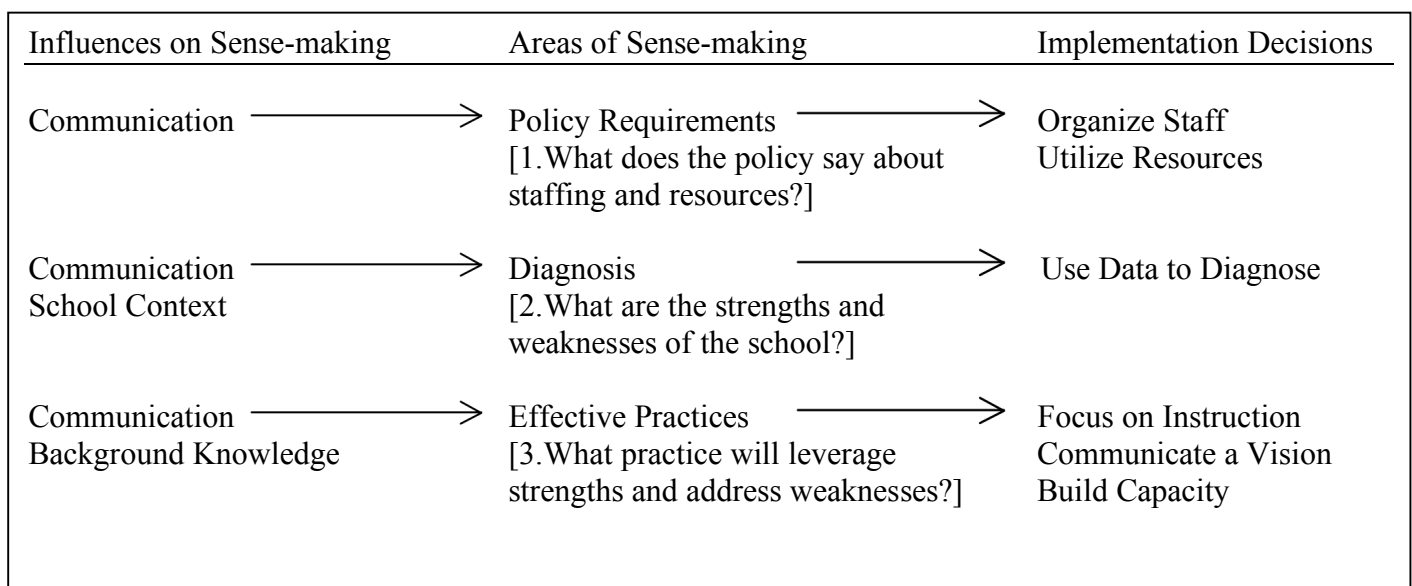


Figure 2 shows the relationship between the influences on sense-making, the areas of sense-making and the implementation decisions. With each of the areas of sense-making were key questions that school leaders asked. This table depicts the questions in a certain order. While there is not necessarily a clean division between each of these questions in terms of their order, generally, school leaders asked about the policy requirements early on in the process. Questions about the school's strengths and weaknesses then quickly followed. Once diagnosis was underway, they then began to look at the effective practices for turnaround implementation. These then led to a range of implementation decisions and actions.

These implementation actions aligned with specific areas of sense-making. From the questions about policy requirements came decisions about how to organize staff and utilize resources. Staffing decisions occurred relative to the staffing authority afforded by the regulations to move staff in and out of the building. Yet, school leaders that did not have that authority, often looked to reorganizing positions or repositioning staff members to put people in places that would maximize their strengths. Similarly, decisions about how to use resources were made based on what became available through level D designation. School leaders who received additional funding, used it to implement programs such as ELT and wraparound. However, schools that did not have additional funding focused their school improvement on the practices that could be implemented despite a dearth of resources. In this way, resources were not only a question of what is available, but also about how best to use what is there.

The process of diagnosing the school for its strengths and weaknesses led school leaders to make data use a critical part of turnaround. In fact, the prevalence of data in sense-making and implementation of turnaround is notable. It was at the crux of school diagnosis, it helped school leaders explain to their staffs the criteria of designation as outlined in the policy, and it became a

significant part of implementation as school leaders put data at the forefront of teaching and learning in their buildings. Data was a driving force in efforts to improve schools in this LEA as it guided how implementers changed their practice, and elements of sense-making and implementation stemmed from how school leaders interpreted the data.

Finally, questions about what practices would effectively move the school forward led to implementation decisions to focus on instruction, communicate a vision, and build capacity. These actions stemmed from two key areas: diagnosis of the school and background knowledge. The diagnosis highlighted the areas on which to focus improvements and to identify practices to target those areas. Background knowledge was applicable particularly where school leaders had turnaround experience. They often entered into new turnaround situations already with a body of knowledge about effective practices from which to draw. In this LEA, the school leaders saw that these three implementation actions, focusing on instruction, communicating a vision and building capacity, would prove to be effective in raising student achievement in their schools.

The influences of communication, background knowledge, and context had key roles in how school leaders made sense of their turnaround work. They shaped how school leaders viewed their schools, how they understood what the turnaround work would entail, and how they decided the steps needed to develop a school that is a place that facilitates learning among its students. For school leaders approaching turnaround work, they should leverage these influences to push their thinking around diagnosing and identifying effective ways to raise school performance.

## **Discussion**

The above findings give insight into how school leaders in this LEA came to understand the process of turning around an underperforming school and what they did to implement turnaround efforts. There were links between their sense-making and implementation actions, where their understanding of the turnaround policy and process informed how they approached the turnaround work. This discussion section first looks at the influences on their sense-making through the theoretical lens of policy sense-making. This is followed by a discussion around how their sense-making was about their deciding on their school improvement strategy and practices and how those practices line up with what the literature says about effective turnaround leadership.

### **The Influences on Sense-making**

This study demonstrates that there are influences on sense-making of school leaders, and these influences are consistent with the theoretical frame presented around sense-making. While the literature discusses policy sense-making in general, this study shows how that theory frame applies to sense-making of turnaround policy among school leaders. The findings presented here point to three main areas of influence: background knowledge gained from previous experience, communication with other stakeholders and implementers, and school context. All three factors can be seen in the theoretical lens used in this study about policy sense-making.

The reconstruction aspect of the theory frame is applicable. School leaders had to engage in some understanding about what the policy was saying in terms of the required steps for implementing turnaround. This usually involved reading the requirements and determining a process for implementing them. Dervin (1998) and Spillane et al. (2006) point out the

importance of the relationship between one's understanding of the policy and their ability to construct meaning. This helps to frame how school leaders in this LEA made sense of the turnaround policy and process as they expressed how they understood what they needed to do to improve their schools. More specifically, school leaders in this LEA drew on any background knowledge they had in order to understand the policy requirements. This is consistent with what Honig (2006) says about existing knowledge shaping one's understanding of the policy. School leaders in this LEA who had experience with turnaround, had existing knowledge of how to turn policy requirements into actionable steps and they used that understanding to interpret the requirements in their current turnaround situation. In this way, background knowledge played a key role in reconstruction, or their construction of meaning from the policy.

Communication was a notable influence on the sense-making of school leaders. Here, co-construction is pertinent, as this communication seemed to have influenced how school leaders understood policy and practices to implement turnaround. Datnow (2006) defines co-construction in sense-making where implementers' interactions help them construct their understanding. She claims that this co-construction is multi-directional and influences implementers' sense-making of the policy. School leaders communicated with colleagues, mentors, and consultants from the state, to clarify what was needed to fulfill requirements of the current turnaround policy. This took on a multidirectional dimension to the communication, which suggested that there was a deeper co-analysis in the interactions about how to implement turnaround. School leaders also communicated with their staffs, which primarily involved transmitting information about what the data was saying about the performance of the school relative to the criteria of designation according to the policy. They were talking about the policy requirements, which appeared to contribute to their understanding of how to implement

turnaround policy and process. Communication as revealed in this study seemed to occur informally and at times by chance. At least one leader interviewed claimed that communication within the LEA was limited. This suggests that school leaders' opportunities to communicate around policy implementation were inconsistent. Given this, school leaders would benefit from leveraging communication as a source of sense-making. Although school leaders are communicating about turnaround on some level, they may benefit from optimizing their communication to push their thinking about their turnaround efforts. With an understanding that co-construction is a part of sense-making, they can seek out opportunities for communication as they explore their understanding of turnaround policy and the practice. Dialoguing with other implementers and stakeholders would help to shape school leaders' thinking about how to improve their schools, with the aim to make more effective school improvement decisions.

School context, also appeared to have influenced how school leaders made sense of the turnaround process. Datnow (2006) describes how people's actions and the setting in which they operate can be understood only in conjunction with each other. Applying this to turnaround policy implementation, how people understand and implement policy is influenced by the situation and environment. This helps to explain how context influences school leaders. School leaders in this LEA acknowledged that not all turnaround schools look the same and that the culture of the school and the situation of turnaround matter. They pointed out that because schools are different and their contexts influence turnaround, the turnaround work is actually about identifying strengths and weaknesses of the school. This is linked to the process of diagnosis that was described in the findings. Spillane and Coldren (2011) discuss this as they highlight the need for school leaders to adopt a diagnosis mindset to identify the nature of problems in the school for potential redesign. Context is a part of school leaders' sense-making



and often comes in as they examine the needs of the school. As noted in the findings, this was a part of the critical process of diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of the school in order to decide what to target in turnaround efforts. Since each school building has its own unique situation, understanding that situation informs how the school leader perceives its needs.

As school leaders engaged in the work of improving chronically underperforming schools, their sense-making was influenced by a few key factors. These factors were consistent with what the literature points to as having a role in sense-making. Reconstruction, co-construction, and context all appear to play a part in school leaders' processing and understanding of the policy and process of turning around a chronically underperforming school. School leaders need to pay attention to how these three elements of sense-making influence their understanding of their turnaround situation. With the knowledge that sense-making is a critical part of turnaround, that it is what drives implementation of turnaround policy and practice, school leaders could take advantage of these influences and focus their improvement efforts on their diagnosis of their schools and the actions needed to improve the school. This may stand in contrast with a belief that school improvement answers exist outside the building, with a reliance on outside resources as opposed to diagnosis the approach to school improvement (Spillane & Coldren, 2011). Rather, school leaders can rely on their own diagnosis and analysis of school needs, as part of their sense-making, to determine the optimal course of action for school improvement.

### **Strategy in Implementation**

The findings show not only the influences on sense-making, but they point to that which school leaders' are making sense. The turnaround legislation in this state outlines requirements

around the development of the turnaround plan and dictates who is responsible for the implementation of that plan. This includes deadlines for certain phases of plan development and the particular areas that need to be addressed in the plan. What this turnaround legislation does not do is articulate strategy to improve performance. It does not set out to make suggestions around strategies for school improvement. This is pertinent because while school leaders are engaging in policy sense-making, this goes beyond looking at the policy requirements to asking questions around the best strategy to make their school a better place for students to learn. This is where implementation comes in. As the school leaders in this LEA talked about what they did to implement turnaround, they were in essence talking about the strategy they felt they needed to take to improve school performance, strategy that could not be found in the policy itself. Thus, sense-making for school leaders centered on strategy about what they would do to implement turnaround, and this strategy came from consideration of the key areas that were outlined in the findings, policy requirements, diagnosis of school needs, and effective practices.

**Policy Requirements.** Findings indicate that school leaders initially looked to policy requirements to tell them what the policy affords and requires them to do. Here questions emerged around what was allowed and allotted via the policy. What is a school leader's staffing authority? What resources are available? What are the benchmarks and goals the state is looking for? These usually were some of the first questions they asked when embarking on the turnaround process and were especially important to decisions about staffing and resources. Regarding staffing in leadership for school improvement, the literature points to Spillane and Coldren (2011) who describe how teacher hiring is one of several tasks leaders have to exercise as part of the diagnosis and designing process. For school leaders in this LEA, staffing was an important question as they considered what was needed to increase school performance and in

order to make these decisions, they needed to know what the policy says about their authority in staffing decisions.

Another key question that came up was around the resources where school leaders asked about what resources were available to them and how they would utilize those resources. In particular, they saw the funding that was made available through the redesign grant and used that funding to support key initiatives, such as the wellness program and extended learning time. Some research done on turnaround leadership has noted that resources are important in terms of leaders needing to invest adequate resources (Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss, 2010; Potter et al., 2002) and needing to funnel resources to teachers to help with their practice (Anderson et al., 1999). The school leaders in this study looked to the funding that came with the redesign grant through level D designation to provide such resources for their teachers. Yet, the support for turnaround is not only about having the resources, but also centers on how the school leaders use them. Where additional funding was available, school leaders took advantage of this to help address social and emotional needs of students and to provide time for teachers to collaborate. However, where these additional resources are minimal or unavailable, school leaders considered how best to use what was available. Corallo and McDonald (2001) acknowledge that schools that serve communities where poverty is high typically need to stretch the resources that are available. Indeed, the high rate of free and reduced priced lunch in this LEA indicates that procuring resources is a challenge. In response, school leaders have tried to maximize what was available to them. This is where strategy comes in. The policy may open the door for additional resources going to the school to support turnaround; however, it does not give guidance to a school leader on how to use those resources. Rather, the school leader makes decisions about how best to utilize those resources to move the school forward.

For school leaders trying to determine the best use of resources, the process of diagnosis is helpful. Decisions about effective use of resources should be rooted in their analysis of school needs and available resources. These decisions may be about putting resources into high-leverage areas that would have a larger impact on student achievement. Again, consideration of context is important here in that for each school, that high-leverage area may be different. School leaders' decisions about utilizing resources is not only about procuring additional funding, but also involves strategy in maximizing available resources that follows a diagnosis of the school.

**School Diagnosis.** Much of the strategy of school leaders is based on how they diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of their schools. Spillane's and Coldren's (2011) discussion of school diagnosis is useful here as they claim that this process of diagnosing and redesigning is ongoing, is focused on the technical core of teaching and learning, and encompasses the multidimensional nature of instruction. Recognizing the complexity of schools, they identify this process of diagnosis as a critical feature of school improvement and justify this approach over a reliance on external resources. School leaders in this LEA seemed to embody this "diagnosis mindset" as they examined the areas of strength and those that need improvement. School diagnosis was a significant part of what school leaders do in this LEA to identify the needs of the school in order to determine the areas on which to focus strategy for school improvement. In fact, it was this process of diagnosis that drove school improvement.

Data played a significant role in diagnosis as school leaders looked to data to tell them what was going well in the school and what needed improvement. School leaders' examination of the data led to questions about school performance, which guided the improvement strategies. The focus here was around how data analysis led to an increase of student learning through improved instruction. This use of data is consistent with what Leithwood et al., (2010) point out

as a critical part of the instructional programming, a constant monitoring of evidence about student learning and adjusting instructional decisions based on that evidence. Data plays a similar role in overall school performance. Murphy and Meyers (2008) emphasize the role of data as a key part of a school's continual process of self-analysis in order to monitor progress and determine areas that persistently lag. Mirroring what the literature says about use of data as effective leadership practice, in this LEA, school leaders made data a prevalent part of their practice and used it as a primary source of information to guide their diagnosis of school needs, which informed their improvement strategies. Again, the policy does not discuss the role of data, although designation rests primarily on assessment performance. School leaders make decisions based on what the data is saying in order to reach school improvement goals. This is the diagnosis they rely on to tell them the strategy needed to improve school performance, which is the ultimate goal of the policy.

**Effective school improvement practices.** Some strategy is influenced by what school leaders have come to understand as effective school improvement practices, based on previous experience. The practices mentioned here go beyond using data, utilizing resources, and making sure staffing is in place. Most of the school leaders interviewed had some experience with school turnaround. They typically brought practices from their experience that they believed would lead to successful turnaround. One such practice occurs once staff is in place, capacity building. Fullan (2006) qualifies this capacity building as that which focuses on student learning outcomes and points out that successful change partly comes from operating on the assumption that the lack of capacity is the problem to which the school leader needs to attend. Harris (2006) similarly emphasizes the need to build capacity for improved teaching and learning with a focus on staff development to improve performance of underperforming schools with challenging

contexts. This helps to frame how school leaders in this LEA saw capacity building of faculties as the tool, which would most strengthen instruction. Clubine et al. (2001) further point out that staff development in successful turnaround schools centers on literacy and are linked to student needs. This again is where data analysis came in to identify what those students needs were. One key part of this capacity building is teacher collaboration around instruction. Collaboration is important to the success of turning around an underperforming school in that it gives opportunities for teachers to discuss student progress and instruction (Clubine et al., 2001). Where teachers in this LEA met to analyze data and discuss instructional responses, this was a high-leverage practice to improve instruction and therefore accelerate student learning. Since professional development is a common tool used to attend to the lack of capacity, looking at how that is provided for teachers helps to understand how leadership can effectively increase the quality of instructional performance. Largely stemming from their understanding of turnaround leadership through previous experience, school leaders in this study prioritized capacity building as part of their leadership practice, which mirrors the emphasis that the literature puts on capacity building in the process of turning around a school.

A prevalent question that came up in the findings around capacity building was about how to balance pressure and support. School leaders in this LEA asked themselves how much pressure to put on to improve teacher performance versus how much to assuage staff anxieties around turnaround. These tend to come in contrast with each other because as the findings suggest, applying pressure often led to raising anxiety, which partly stemmed from fears around job status. Research has shown that pressure has a role in turnaround. For example, leveraging accountability pressure to focus on performance objectives was one leadership practice shown to contribute to successful improvement in some schools. (Jacobson et al., 2005). In this LEA,

school leaders have at moments utilized accountability status to apply pressure on staff to improve their instructional practices. On the other hand, calming fears could imply that the school leader avoids pressure. This is where support may come in. Potter et al. (2002) articulates this as a balance of support and pressure. That is, perhaps it is not so much about pitting pressure against building confidence, but more about support and pressure working in tandem with each other. Where a school leader increases expectations around performance, they also provide opportunities for staff to build their capacity to meet those expectations. Fullan (2006) states that schools need to establish conditions for positive pressure, where the system is evolved to the point where there are no legitimate reasons to not improve performance. By removing excuses, then judgments about performance are justified. The tension school leaders in this LEA feel regarding how much pressure to apply while building confidence essentially is about this question of how much their judgments of teacher performance are justified, given the challenging conditions of their underperforming school. Alongside this question around judgments are questions about how much challenge and support are needed for teachers to improve performance. With the challenge, comes some risk for teachers who are asked to engage in professional learning that requires collaboration with other teachers, which may expose their practice, and asks them to critically examine their work as teachers. This may leave some teachers feeling vulnerable. School leaders recognize and attempt to mitigate these feelings of vulnerability through actions to help assuage fears. They also see that the role of support is critical to developing their teachers, which also helps to calm their anxieties through building confidence.

Finally, school leaders saw the importance of communicating a vision and focusing on instruction as part of their school improvement efforts. Here, leadership moves included

strategies to maintain this focus and to have everyone on staff moving in the same direction. School leaders in this LEA saw the importance of communicating a vision, a leadership practice that is well-supported in the literature. Leithwood et al. (2010) note that a shared vision to turnaround underperforming schools is needed. This suggests that collaboration is important in order for all staff in the school building to have a stake in that vision. Duke et al. (2005) further says that the vision and mission needs to be focused on student learning. In fact, setting a vision is a key part of the transformational leadership model as noted earlier (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1999). School leaders in this LEA understood this importance of vision and saw it as integral to their work.

Similarly, a focus on instruction has been found significant in turnaround in this ELA as school leaders noted having to focus all conversations on planning and instruction. The literature also points to this as critical to the work of improving underperforming school. Specifically, Picucci et al. (2002), in their study of school turnaround, found that schools that showed rapid achievement gains helped to maintain instructional quality by reducing any distractions to teaching. Leithwood et al. (2010) too emphasize this as they note the need to reduce distractions to teaching. This focus on instruction is an important component of the instructional leadership model where a school leader's actions are directly linked to the quality of instruction in the school (Hallinger, 2003). The school leaders in this study saw that implementing practices in an effort to maintain this focus was critical to their school improvement strategy. This is consistent with what literature claims to be a part of effective turnaround strategy and practice.

**School leaders' strategies beyond policy mandates.** The process of turning around a chronically underperforming schools is complex and its undertaking by any school leader is significant. This study shows that school leaders relied on a range of factors to understand their



school, its needs and strengths, and use this to make decisions about what to do to improve school performance. Their policy sense-making went beyond the policy requirements turnaround planning to include the strategies they saw as effective in raising school performance. This then led to turnaround implementation, the decisions and actions that went into enacting a strategy to improve the school. The practices for school improvement used in this LEA are consistent with what some of the research has shown to be effective in turning around failing schools. The school leaders in this LEA were asking and answering similar questions around school improvement to that of other school leaders. Yet, those practices were not about a formulaic program or initiative as a panacea for school improvement. The leadership for school turnaround here involved a process of diagnosis and knowledge about the expectations for student learning, which, along with an understanding of effective practice, informed turnaround strategy.

This research set out to see how implementation of turnaround was different under policy mandates. While the policy imposes certain requirements about the steps of turnaround and what is to be included in turnaround planning, the essential questions about how best to improve the school are the same with or without those mandates. School leaders in this LEA are still asking what practices will in the end lead to greater student learning, questions which are not answered by the policy itself. School leaders drew on a range of elements to help them identify what those practices are for their unique schools.

## **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is about access to participants. Our data collection began late in the research process due to complications and delays related to LEA access. Once we obtained access to the LEA, I then approached individuals to participate in interviews. While many of the

school leaders were willing to participate, not all did. This led to one turnaround school not being represented in the data here. The delay in access also resulted in limited time for data collection while analyzing data. Time was not available to pursue other leads around themes that were emerging through analysis of interview transcripts.

A second limitation is about the sampling. I intended to interview school leaders only in schools that were either currently in turnaround or had already gone through the turnaround process. Due to various reasons, I ended up interviewing only five school leaders using this sampling. I then reached out to school leaders in level C schools that were in the single-digit percentile, therefore very close to designation, and interviewed three additional people. With this sampling, 6 out of the 8 people interviewed were associated with the school in the LEA that showed substantial success in their turnaround efforts. The other two school leaders also had experience in turnaround outside the LEA. This was unplanned and when I started to see this pattern, I suspected that it was not just a coincidence. In one of the later interviews, a participant confirmed my suspicion that the superintendent's strategy had been to grow leadership in that one school and disseminate it to the other schools, particularly those that are most struggling. This would explain why when I choose the lowest performing schools, the leaders had had experience in successful turnaround. The drawback to this is that the information here presents one particular story about how this LEA sees its turnaround efforts, and this may or may not be represented by others in the LEA that did not experience this turnaround success.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Recommendations<sup>6</sup>**

#### **Discussion**

Our study looked at sense-making of policy implementation from the perspective of four different implementer groups in a single LEA's chronically underperforming school system. Sense-making involves the understanding and interpretation of policies and their intended meanings, and it can influence the success or failure of reform initiatives (Honig, 2006). We wanted to understand the role sense-making played in what the implementers actually did and what they thought was effective. Each of the four implementer groups (School Board, superintendent/central office, school leadership, and teachers) identified the goal of turnaround as sustainable improvement in the LEA's chronically underperforming schools. Each of the four researchers in this study examined a different group of implementers and produced individual findings for the group studied. By looking across our findings from the different levels of implementation within the same local education agency (LEA) we were able to come up with important recommendations about communication, the importance of data, the use of resources to support turnaround, and a vision of leadership for the LEA.

In this chapter, we present the following three broad recommendations to help the LEA reach its stated goal of sustainable improvement from its turnaround policy implementation. First, there needs to be a focus on improved communication between implementers. By researching four different implementation levels we were able to identify areas where increased

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<sup>6</sup> This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anna Carollo Cross, Jamie B. Chisum, Jill S. Geiser, Charles Grandson IV

communication could aid this process. Our second recommendation involves the need for the LEA to specify a process for resource allocation. The implementers we studied experienced frustration over what they perceived as inconsistencies in how resources were distributed across the LEA. Building a consistent and transparent system of resource allocation would increase trust and effectiveness. Our third recommendation involves developing the capacity of implementers to work with data. Our findings pointed to the value of data to communicate progress of the school and to inform instruction in the classroom; however, the capacity to understand and work with this valuable tool was inconsistent across implementers. An increased focus on professional development for all levels of implementers in the area of data use would aid the process of turning around the failing schools of the LEA. Finally, we recommend a vision of leadership for the LEA. Implementers of turnaround policy would benefit from a clear vision communicated by the LEA leaders to guide their efforts in turning around their schools.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation One: Communication Between Implementers**

Communication is a broad term that encompasses many important findings from our individual studies. Because increased communication helps to facilitate sense-making (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2006), we looked at how facilitating communication between all parties increased their capacity to make sense of what they were being asked to do. We also examined the importance of adaptive communication to promote sense-making (Heifitz, Grashaw, Linskey, 2009). Adaptive communication leads to adaptive behaviors and centers more on implementer beliefs and behaviors rather than on the technical requirements of the policy. Finally, the four of us identified some specific areas where communication can be strengthened.

A finding in each of our four studies involved the need for the turnaround policy to be communicated on a continual basis throughout the implementer chain, from the school board, superintendent, school leaders, on to teachers and back again. Some of this communication involved the requirements of the plan and what it meant for a school to be named as chronically underperforming. There were things that had to be done for compliance and the superintendent needed to disseminate that information up to the school board and then down to principals and teachers. We found traditional structures, such as school board and principal meetings and staff meetings in local schools, where this communication might happen. In the early part of the turnaround implementation this took on a very directive flavor. Principals and teachers perceived their jobs at the introduction of this crisis of designation to be about hearing the directive communication from their bosses and performing the task they were being told to do. This was also true in the case of the superintendent's communication of the plan to the school board, even though the board was tasked with hiring and firing the superintendent. According to the turnaround legislation, the superintendent of the education agency is the person responsible for writing and communicating the plans to others in the system. Interestingly, the superintendent's communication to the school board in this LEA was also directive. Members of the school board understood their role in the turnaround process to be about doing what the state and the superintendent told them they needed to do. This was clearly efficient in the early stages of the process. With the need for LEA's to complete their turnaround within three years, the pressure to begin the action phase of any plan is immense and pushes leaders to spend less time discussing and more time trying to make gains in student achievement. Directive communication appears to be the most effective way to enter the process quickly.

Our research suggested that the communication became more complicated during the next steps of the implementation process. Once the plan for turnaround was communicated, different implementers confronted the realities of putting that plan into action. Inevitably, more communication became necessary. For example, the school board needed to reach out to the community and begin communicating with people about how they were responding to the new designation. The superintendent needed to hand off the work of implementation to the members of the central staff and the building leadership in order to be able to attend to all her other tasks. Finally, building leadership needed to enable teachers to change the work they had been doing in order to improve student results. In the action phase of implementation, communication needed to be multi-directional and sense made by each implementer (Datnow, 2006; Honig, 2006). Community members wanted their questions answered and their concerns heard. Principals needed access to resources from central office to train staff or purchase materials necessary to follow the plan. Teachers needed to be engaged in what Datnow calls "co-construction" as they discussed with each other their interpretation of the turnaround process.

The difference between the type of communication needed for an understanding of the turnaround designation and that necessary for an effective implementation of the plan are essentially the difference between technical and adaptive communication (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Heifetz et al. (2009) define adaptive leadership as, "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive." (p. 2). Our studies found that technical communication between and among the implementers had already been accomplished. The LEA knew it was designated as chronically underperforming. From the school board to the teachers, implementers understood the need for raising test scores. Principals and central office staff helped to communicate the formal process of how teachers might opt out of working in a

turnaround school. Staff at all levels had a functional understanding of what the turnaround designation meant and what the school needed to do in order to be successful. However, from our research we identified two areas of need involving adaptive communication. The first was to establish the new beliefs and culture of turnaround. The second was to answer two essential questions for the individual implementer engaged in turnaround work: 1) What is my role in turnaround?; and 2) What are the expectations for turnaround?

During the beginning phase of turnaround, the superintendent and building leadership drafted plans that became the shared vision of the work. This phase relied much more on the dissemination of information rather than discussion between implementers. The second phase of implementation relied more heavily on ideas involving co-construction, where implementers made sense of their role by talking to people in similar roles (Datnow, 2006). They came to a new understanding of their role in the turnaround process by contextualizing and interpreting directives by the superintendent or the building leadership through their own experience and prior knowledge (Spillane et al., 2006). When success was achieved in different places in the LEA, we found that implementers next needed to create a culture with norms that internalized the wisdom of this newly formed knowledge. Communication at this stage became far more complicated because the people who were involved in the work of turnaround were now more knowledgeable. School Board members saw what worked and what did not and began to question where efficiencies could be found. Central office personnel began to understand patterns in data and behaviors as a result of their work. Principals spoke about removing themselves to the background as teachers began to lead improvement initiatives.

From these findings the research team derived three ways that communication can be strengthened in this LEA to improve the turnaround process and its sustainability. Our

recommendations focus on using existing structures and developing better communication processes that can take place within those structures. The first recommendation is the use of the building principal meetings with central office staff to develop a common language around what it means to turn around underperforming schools and to help schools change before they are designated as underperforming. The second is about using the broad representation of implementers present in the original local stakeholders group to provide an ongoing planning group throughout implementation phases. A third way communication can be strengthened is through an effort to ensure the school board understands the work of turnaround and their specific role in it.

Within the LEA we studied, since 2009 there have been four schools designated as chronically underperforming. Two of these schools have successfully exited and become a level A and level B school respectively. A third school was closed by the LEA rather than be allowed to fall to level F status, and a fourth school was newly designated as chronically underperforming in the fall prior to the beginning of our study. There are lessons to be learned from all of these cases. Both successful schools have stories to tell about what made a difference in their turnaround efforts. Certainly all school turnaround contexts have unique elements to them, but within a single LEA, there is wisdom to be shared across schools.

**Central Office Principal Meetings.** The common language and wisdom gleaned through communication at these principal and central office meetings would be valuable for the principals of schools who are not yet designated as chronically underperforming. School leaders of all schools we observed were tracking closely their student performance data and several of the schools designated as level C were working to find ways of avoiding an eventual level D designation. Explicit communication about how two schools succeeded and how a third failed



would be invaluable for school leaders at these level C schools. Central Office staff can develop an understanding about these different scenarios by looking across what happened at all three schools and sharing the information at these meetings. This data should form the basis of the LEA's plan to support not only the newly designated level D school, but also other schools who are struggling to avoid such a designation.

Wisdom gained from these principal and central office meetings would also benefit implementers on the opposite ends of the chain (teachers and school board members) by communicating plans to improve student learning prior to a chronically underperforming designation. Opportunities could be created for teachers from turned around schools to share experiences with the staff in newly designated schools as well as schools that are in danger of falling to this designation. School leaders at the level C schools could begin creating shared visions for student success and hopefully improve the academic experience of their current students before an intervention was demanded from the state. Communication should not only focus on the best (and worst) practices but also on helping teachers and school board members to better understand the purpose of turnaround, as well as the expectations of their role within the policy.

**Local Stakeholders Group.** Another recommendation is that the composition of the Local Stakeholders Group (LSG) should be replicated on the school's redesign team. The LSG is composed of members of the community at large, the school board, teachers, and administrators from the school and central office. Some LEA's also include students where developmentally appropriate. The purpose of the LSG is to come up with a list of recommendations for a superintendent as he or she develops the turnaround plan for the LEA. However, once the recommendations are made, this group is disbanded. All of the stakeholders on the group

continue to be concerned about the well being of their school, but often the school's redesign team does not include anyone from outside the school's staff. Including a representative group of stakeholders similar to the LSG composition would help to increase communication between the different stakeholder groups. Consistent meetings about the progress of the school will help keep everyone informed and could possibly aid in the procurement of resources from the members of this group. Ongoing input and communication within a redesign team with this type of constitution could pose a challenge to the building principal's authority and accountability without a clear understanding of norms, protocols, and expectations for how these meetings should be run. The central office representative and the building leadership should be in constant communication over how the group is functioning and revisiting the norms and expectations whenever necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the team.

**Building School Board Capacity.** There is also a need for clearer expectations about the role and responsibility of the school board in an LEA's turnaround. This is a specific recommendation for this LEA despite the fact that there are multiple board members who have already witnessed the turnaround process in three of their schools. School board members have four areas of authority: budget, policy, evaluation of the superintendent, and collective bargaining. Turnaround legislation has clouded the board's responsibilities. Making sense of the committee's current role requires direct and explicit conversation. We recommend there be dedicated time for a school board workshop on turnaround. Professional development for school board members in turnaround LEA's should be explicit, ongoing, and focus on how they can support turnaround efforts in the local context. Not only does the board need to be clear on what the policy requires of the local education agency, but they also need a clearer understanding of what their role will be in the turnaround process moving forward. Giving this attention to the

school board would help facilitate the process of turning around the LEA's underperforming schools.

**Support for Teacher Collaboration.** Collaboration and teamwork are areas that research has shown to contribute to successful school improvement. Some studies have found that relationship building coupled with collaboration between stakeholders is key to raising the level of performance of an underperforming school (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Duke et al., 2005; Fullan, 2006; Harris, 2006; Mulford et al., 2008; Murphy & Meyers, 2008). A teacher at the turned around school described how teamwork contributed to school improvement this way, "There were supportive conversations, I mean, we got a good laugh, no doubt about it, from all the craziness that did occur, but in the end it was supportive because it ended up making us a family." This aligns with what literature on effective school leadership says about building teamwork as an essential element in any school striving to improve (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Scribner et al., 2011). It is important to recognize that people are the most important resource in an LEA, and that they are not merely vessels to hold new information. They need time together, to develop collaborative relationships, so that they can provide internal support for one another as things get challenging in the turnaround process. We know a turned around school benefits any neighborhood it is in, but it cannot fix all the ills faced by today's urban and rural poor. Problems will persist well beyond improved student results. The only way the people in these schools can also persist is as members of a committed team who continually communicate with each other. Staff must constantly be given time and opportunity to work together so they do not feel isolated while working in this challenging environment.

## **Recommendation Two: Specify a transparent process for allocating resources**

It is our hope that ensuring a transparent process for school resource allocation will result in increased equity and fairness and thereby increase trust between implementers. By building trust, implementers can work together more cooperatively and effectively, further ensuring that the capacity and collective efficacy developed during the turnaround process can be sustained. Additionally, further development of resource support and early identification and intervention of struggling schools may prevent the number of level D schools in the LEA and the need for drastic interventions.

**Key Elements for Implementing Recommendations.** As limited resources are available in the LEA, the criteria and priorities about how resources are distributed to specific programs and schools need to be developed. By establishing a baseline for best practices for school improvement, all implementer groups, including school board, superintendent/central office, principals, and teachers can assess the impact of their actions and decisions in relation to student achievement. The LEA should consider the individual needs of schools and school context to identify how each school implements these baseline practices, using the school review partner process. After implementers come to a consensus about the needs of the school and the next steps for intervention, the LEA should consider a way to measure school resource usage after they are distributed, and a way to incorporate a research function in the process of deciding how to allocate resources.

**Clarify funding streams.** The LEA, like many others throughout the state, is grappling with maintaining services for students in the face of dwindling tax revenues, increased student needs and services, and the funding cliff derived from the expiration of Race to the Top (RTTT) and other grant funds. All implementer groups interviewed acknowledged that they did not

believe they had enough resources to meet the needs of students. To sustain student achievement gains and teacher efficacy, the LEA should develop a comprehensive plan that prioritizes programming and initiatives that will remain or be curtailed when current funding streams diminish. Additionally, multiple implementer groups interviewed discussed that funding support is only available to level D schools, thereby unintentionally incentivizing level D status. The LEA should define a framework for resource allocation based on school level, programming, and student needs. This framework should include details of funding streams for academic and extracurricular programs, additional pay for teachers, full-time equivalents, and other areas essential to effective implementation of turnaround policy.

**Manage human resources.** It is recommended that the LEA streamline and replicate the most successful process for teacher “opt-out” of level D schools to ensure consistency of implementation across schools. This would include providing school leaders with explicit professional development on assessing the “fit” of instructional staff members, utilizing pre-determined LEA best practices from past “opt-out” rounds. Implementing a consistent process across schools that fosters trust, facilitates transparency, and diminishes misalignment between policy implementer groups may assist with the goal of keeping all implementer groups ultimately focused on achieving LEA and school goals.

**Identify where to add time.** We recommend that the LEA provide a plan for sustainability to ensure continuity of teacher common planning time and extended learning time services to students. Teachers in level D schools interviewed felt that they can successfully effectuate change and meet the needs of students due to the additional collaboration and extended learning time (ELT) opportunities. While complete replication and scalability may

prove challenging, providing educators with opportunities to learn from ELT schools to develop best practices can be adapted in schools lacking resources to pay all teachers for ELT.

The LEA should assess the delivery of support and monitoring across high priority (level D, and C) schools by central office administration. A system to monitor school-level support from central office administrators will ensure clear and equitable support and monitoring. This would assuage the concerns of teachers and school leaders that level D schools receive the most attention and support and counter their stated view that they have to let their schools become “worse” before they receive attention and support.

### **Recommendation Three: Increase the capacity of implementers to work with data.**

An area identified in our findings across implementer groups was the use of data. How data was used (or not used) was one of the most talked-about areas for school improvement by teachers, school leaders, central office personnel, and school board members. In this LEA, data use goes beyond merely examining assessment results to know what schools are eligible for turnaround support. Rather, educators used the data to tell them what areas of school improvement need focus and how to improve instruction. This is consistent with literature that says data is a key in school improvement efforts. Specifically, data is needed to guide instruction, which is essential to improving performance in underperforming schools. It allows educators to measure student progress towards goals, and it helps to pinpoint instructional strengths and weaknesses (Clubine et al., 2001). Indeed, the use of data to guide decisions is considered a condition for successful school improvement (Potter et al., 2002; Corallo & MacDonald, 2001) and this LEA makes data an integral part of their turnaround efforts. The data use in this LEA rests on implementers’ ability to make sense of, or analyze, it, and it is that analysis that guides

improvement efforts. For teachers, improvement is about their instruction at the classroom level. For school leaders, it is about the school as a whole, and for central office personnel, it is about the LEA as a whole. The implementer group that is not directly involved with this level of data analysis is the school board. In fact, the school board seems to have significantly less interaction with the data, which eclipses their ability to engage in understanding improvement efforts in the LEA.

Although data is a significant part of school and LEA improvement planning, findings point to inconsistencies with the level of comfort and ability of different implementers to analyze data. For example, whereas some teachers have facility with data analysis, others feel less comfortable working with it. This seemed to relate to the phase of the school's turnaround efforts. At the school that successfully went through the turnaround process, teachers typically were adept at using the data to inform their practice. On the other hand, in those schools that were at the beginning of turnaround, teachers tended to have less experience with data analysis. Similarly, school board members appeared to have minimal experience with looking at school achievement data and often expressed the desire for better understanding. The implementer groups who worked the most with the data were school leaders and central office personnel. This is notable because it marks key leverage points for increasing capacity to use data across the LEA. Our recommendation is to increase this capacity so that there is more consistency in terms of how implementers understand and use the data.

**Ways to develop capacity to work with data.** The LEA has strengths they can build on to increase the capacity of implementers to use data. Building and LEA leaders, along with numerous teachers, understand the importance of using data and prioritize its role in school improvement. There is at least one school in the LEA where data was made central to its improvement efforts and in the end, was successfully turned around. There is an understanding among school board members that data is relevant to school LEA improvement and recognition of the need to use it in their role as representatives of the community. While this LEA has already begun paying attention to data in its LEA improvement efforts, there are a few key actions that can help to increase the capacity of all implementers to use data that is consistent across schools and across implementer groups. Central office administrators would need to take the lead in providing opportunities for implementers of the turnaround process to engage in quality data analysis in order to lead to more informed and strategic decisions about school improvement.

**School leaders and teachers collaborating around data.** One opportunity to build capacity for analyzing data among teachers is to bring them together to share data analysis practices. While teachers interact with other teachers in their own schools, and perhaps informally with teachers in other schools, more formal structures could allow this to occur more frequently. Collaboration is a key element in turnaround. That is, successful turnaround often depends on the level of collaboration by teachers centered on instruction and problem solving (Harris, 2002; Picucci et al., 2002; Leithwood et al., 2010; Duke et al., 2005; Clubine et al., 2001). Providing teachers with opportunities to collaborate across schools around data would increase their contact with other teachers around best practices and provide new ideas and ways of using data to inform their instruction.



Sharing of best practices can also occur among school leaders. Currently, school leaders in the LEA meet with central office personnel, along with members of their faculty, to analyze data in their data review meetings. In addition, there are LEA level meetings that occur with central office, including the superintendent, and principals of all the schools in the LEA. Findings suggest, however, that there is some inconsistency in how school leaders in this LEA lead data analysis with their staff and use that analysis to improve practice. There is an opportunity here for school leaders to work together to develop their own skills not only about data analysis for school improvement, but also about how to lead their staffs through the turnaround process.

**Increasing community understanding of the data.** Developing better understanding of the data in this LEA also involves the community. This begins with the school board to promote their sense-making of the data. Findings suggest that school board members have little interaction with data and less experience than the educators in the schools with making sense of data in a way that helps them understand the turnaround work. School board members could be provided with more opportunities to examine the data to increase their understanding. These conversations do not need to be overly cumbersome in detail. Rather, they might give an overview of what the data is saying about the LEA and why designations occur. This would put school board members in a better position to communicate with their constituencies about the turnaround work that is happening in the LEA. With a greater understanding of the data, they can dialogue with community members about why some schools are designated as turnaround schools based on their academic performance. Furthermore, the LEA can work in tandem with the school board on outreach to the community. Working together, they could provide settings for dialogues to take place between the LEA and the community about the data. While school

board meetings is perhaps a likely place for this, and our research indicated that indeed discussions around data have occurred there, opportunities offered outside the context of a school board meeting may be beneficial. In the end, this may lead to a more informed community who understand what the data means in terms of the LEA's performance.

#### **Recommendation Four: Communicate a clear vision of leadership for the LEA.**

As we listened to what each of the implementers were saying about turnaround, it became clear that they were looking at turnaround differently and focusing on different aspects of the turnaround process. They were also expressing different priorities about what needed to be done to improve the schools. At times, they noted their own lack of clarity about how to turn around their schools. There appeared to be a lack of interdependence among the different implementer groups. That is, they tended to operate in silos, distinct from each other, and often not in tune to what other implementers were thinking or doing with the turnaround work.

**A lack of interdependence and vision.** There were several places where this lack of interdependence was apparent. The interviews conducted brought out the most pressing questions and understandings of each of the implementer groups and at times showed little consistency or connection between each group. Central office directors spoke about the importance of their monitoring role and how they worked with school leaders to put practices in place to improve school performance. Yet, school leaders did not talk much about this and were more focused on how they were working with their staffs. Teachers described a style of leadership in their schools at the beginning phase of turnaround that was directive, whereas, when school leaders described their approach, it resembled more of an instructional leadership approach. The school board was knowledgeable about the responsibilities given to them under

education reform but they were less clear on their role in turnaround. The other three implementer groups rarely mentioned the school board, indicating that the school board leadership role was not prevalent in their view. These are examples of how the different implementer groups were operating within their own spheres of turnaround work with little connection to each other.

This lack of interdependence may be attributed to the fact that a clear vision from the LEA about what implementers should be thinking and doing to raise school performance was absent. This became apparent when implementers expressed concern about their ability to sustain school success after the turnaround period ends. Their concern was twofold: that they would not be able to continue the work without the additional resources that came with turnaround status and that they did not know their next goal when their turnaround status ended. This suggests that at least some implementers were relying on the policy to set their vision for them. That is, upon designation, their vision was about doing what was necessary to exit turnaround status within a specific timeframe. Implementers did not speak about any kind of long-range vision that the LEA set about turnaround. When asked to articulate the LEA's turnaround philosophy, many could not identify one with any specificity. Without that vision articulated by the LEA, the vision many implementers adopted seemed to be about reaching the policy goals of higher student achievement within a 3-year period. Once that 3-year period ended, some implementers asked "what now?" This is consistent with the finding that the LEA leaders saw the work of turnaround as occurring at the school level, coming from the recognition that the heart of the work is where the students are. However, they did not talk about how they saw the schools as connected with each other as part of a larger LEA network. They did not describe whether they saw the LEA as a

system whose parts should be working together towards a common vision or how they envisioned the system supporting learning at the building level.

**Communicating a vision of leadership.** For this LEA, a clear vision of leadership is needed to help guide and sustain school improvement. Although turnaround is a focus of some schools, non-turnaround schools are going through school improvement, some with the aim to avoid level D designation. Therefore, all schools throughout the LEA would benefit from a more clearly articulated vision of leadership. When talking about turnaround leadership at the school building level, Leithwood et al. (2010) emphasize the importance of vision when they recommend turnaround leaders engage their staffs in developing the vision of a school as a source of motivation to commit to the work of school turnaround. They also suggest using that vision to help guide planning and to ensure that all decisions align with school goals. In implementing this suggestion at the LEA level, this LEA would bring implementer groups more into alignment with each other and with the LEA in terms of how they implement turnaround. Fullan (2006) who also focuses on turnaround leadership at the building level, discusses the need to implement systemic reform by using a “trilevel development solution” that includes alignment between the state, LEA, and school.

What has to happen at the school and community level? The [LEA] level? The level of the state...? the idea is to ‘cause’ developments, along lines of this book, within and across the three levels. It is not so much seeking alignment as it is experiencing permeable connectivity—lots of two-way horizontal and vertical mutual influence (p. 74).

Establishing this connectivity and alignment requires conversation, face to face interactions and the co-construction of meaning that are integral to the sense-making described

by researchers (Weick, 1995; Datnow, 2006). This connectivity needs to happen between all three levels Fullan describes above and requires the state and the LEA to monitor progress on a case by case basis.

This tri-level development solution aptly describes the importance of connecting the different levels of turnaround, school, community, LEA and state, in terms of how to approach turnaround work. For the purposes of this recommendation, the focus is on the relationship between the LEA, community and the school in that all three need to be working in concert with each other. A vision of leadership in this LEA would strengthen those relationships and help to create the interdependence needed for implementers of turnaround policy to be working in the same direction. Making sure that all voices are represented, including dissenting voices, can also reinforce strengthening the interdependence between implementer groups. Creating a common vision would not be about merely exiting or avoiding turnaround status. Rather, it would be about the kinds of educational experiences that leadership would create for students that transcend what the turnaround policy mandates. In fact, creating a common vision for the entire LEA would benefit schools at all levels of designation and not just those who have been deemed chronically underperforming. A vision of leadership would help implementers speak the same language about what they need to focus on and what they need to do to increase the quality experiences that result in higher student learning in the entire system.

## **Conclusion**

This research generated insights into what educators in this LEA think and do as they implement turnaround policy. Emerging from these insights are recommendations that are intended to enhance the turnaround work that is already happening across schools in this LEA.

Because sense-making relies so heavily on communication, increasing communication is suggested here as a way to facilitate understanding of turnaround policy. Yet, this understanding goes beyond knowing the policy requirements. Communication can help educators in the LEA better understand their role and expectations, which are not necessarily outlined in the policy. This enhances the process of co-construction as implementers' communication with each other helps them to make meaning. Also recommended is to specify a transparent process for allocating resources. This LEA makes decisions about how resources are distributed across schools and programs. Yet, the findings from this research study suggest that there is some confusion as to how those decisions are made. Clarifying these decisions would help to alleviate confusion and increase trust in the process, which can then help to guide implementers' decisions about turnaround implementation. The third recommendation about data use comes from a major theme, which emerged across the individual studies about the prevalence of data in school improvement planning and implementation. This LEA already uses data, but there are some inconsistencies in the capacity of implementers to analyze and use data. School leaders, central office personnel, and teachers, would benefit from collaborative opportunities for work with data. School board members may need more experience with data in order to communicate with their constituencies about what the data says about the schools in the LEA. Providing more opportunities for implementers to work with data would not only help with school improvement efforts, but it would also help the community of this LEA to better understand the data that informs turnaround work in their schools.

These recommendations aim to outline how this LEA can increase its capacity to exercise successful turnaround of its chronically underperforming schools. Increased communication can lead to more sense-making, which can help to guide turnaround implementation decisions. More

transparency about the way resources are distributed can offer guidance to implementers throughout the LEA about how to approach turnaround work. Increasing capacity to analyze and use data would inform decisions that successfully lead to school improvement. As with most advice about school improvement, this is not offered as a universal remedy to this LEA's turnaround challenges. Rather, these recommendations are intended to enhance the thinking that goes into school improvement planning and implementation. That is, these suggestions can help implementers make sound decisions about what they should do when taking on the immense task of turning around a chronically underperforming school.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Definition of Terms**

**NCLB** - No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

**Blueprint for Reform** - The Blueprint for Reform is President Obama's 2010 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

**RTTT** - Race to the Top is a grant program designed to spur innovation and reform in the nation's K-12 schools. It is funded by the Education Recovery Act, which is part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

**SIG** - School Improvement Grant. This is a federal grant program authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. They are grants to State Education Agencies (SEAs) used for competitive grants to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that demonstrate the greatest need and the strongest commitment to use the funds to provide adequate resources in order to rapidly and dramatically improve student achievement in their lowest-performing schools.

**Turnaround legislation** - State legislation from 2010 whose stated purpose is to provide innovation in schools and to turnaround underperforming schools. It was written in part to respond to the federal requirement that states wishing to qualify for RTTT funds needed to have their own legislation outlining school improvement requirements that was in line with President Obama's Blueprint for Reform.

**SRG** - School Redesign Grants is a SEA program from SIG that offers competitive grants to intervene in the lowest performing local LEA's in the state.

**Level C and D and F School Designation** - State schools in the lowest 20% relative to other schools in their grade span are designated level C. Schools that are the lowest performing from the level C group are those eligible to be designated as level D schools. Not more than 4% of the total number of public schools in (the state under study) can be designated as level D. Level F schools are designated for state takeover.

**Local Stakeholder group** - Upon being designated a level D school the Superintendent has 30 days within which they must convene a stakeholders group whose task it will be to make recommendations to the Superintendent for the Turnaround Plan.

**Turnaround plan** - written by the Superintendent of the LEA based on the recommendations from the Local Stakeholders group, this plan must be submitted to the SEA for review by the Commissioner who may choose to approve the plan for up to three years. The plan must include specific steps and timelines outlined by the state. The plan is designed to be a template for applications for SRG application.

**School redesign team** - the job of the school redesign team is to use the Superintendent's turnaround plan to create a three-year redesign plan that will serve as the day-to-day roadmap for implementation. The redesign team is also tasked with overseeing the operation of the plan and making adjustments based on data and results as needed.

**School redesign plan** - is the plan written by the school redesign team to serve as the actual implementation of the Superintendent's Turnaround Plan. It may include applying for an SRG and serves in place of the School Improvement Plan (SIP).

**Policy implementers** - for the purpose of this research study the policy implementers studied will be limited to members of the school board, central office, the building principal, and teachers.

#### **Four Models of the Federal Redesign Grants**

- 1) **Turnaround** - Up to 50% of the staff is excised and a new principal is brought on board to turn around the underperforming school.
- 2) **Restart** - school composition is changed by the LEA and may be taken over by an External Management Organization (EMO), often a charter school.
- 3) **School Closure** - the school is closed and the remaining students are dispersed to other schools within the LEA.
- 4) **Transformation** - the LEA attempts to meet the demands for improved student gains under its current staff and student configuration.

## Appendix B: List of Codes

### Start List of Codes

Assessments (ASM):
Central Office (CO)
Challenge (CHA)
Collaboration (COL)
Communication: (COM)
Context: (CON)
Equity (EQ)
Factors: (FAC)
Implementer Responsibility and Roles (IMRR)
Making Sense (MS)
Policy Implementation Results (PIRE)
Political (POL)
Principals (PR)
Prior Knowledge: (PRK)
Reflection (RFLC)
Relationship (REL)
Resistance (RES)
School board (SC)
Social (SOC)
Student Impact (SIM)

Support (SPT)
Sustainability (SUS)
Teachers (TCH)
Trust (TRU)
Use of data (USD)

### **List of Actual Codes (Parent and Child Codes Included)**

<p>Communication between Implementers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superintendent to Central Office</li> <li>• School Leader to Teacher</li> <li>• School Committee to Superintendent</li> <li>• Superintendent to School Leaders</li> <li>• Between Implementers</li> </ul>
<p>Culture/values and beliefs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture change</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of resources</li> <li>• equity of distribution</li> <li>• use of resources</li> <li>• resources to support turnaround</li> </ul>
<p>Leadership Behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• instructional leadership</li> <li>• distributed leadership</li> <li>• hiring/staffing</li> <li>• directive leadership</li> <li>• shared vision</li> <li>• support/guidance</li> </ul>
<p>Collaboration</p>
<p>Sensemaking turnaround process sensemaking of ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• policy requirements</li> <li>• data</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• chronic of underperforming contributing factors</li> <li>• state intervention</li> <li>• expectations</li> <li>• directives</li> <li>• roles</li> </ul>
<p>Attitude about turnaround</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• motivation</li> <li>• perceived barriers to implementation</li> <li>• perceived support for implementation</li> </ul>
Policy Implementation Results
Political
<p>Capacity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• community</li> <li>• internal</li> </ul>
Co-construction
Context
<p>Data use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• data to inform PD</li> <li>• to assess educator performance</li> <li>• to initiate change</li> <li>• to inform instruction</li> <li>• to identify strengths and weaknesses</li> <li>• to understand designation</li> </ul>
Re-construction
Social capital
<p>Implementer voice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dissenter voice</li> </ul>
Sustainability



## **Appendix C: Consent to Participate in Interview**

Boston College Lynch School of Education

Informed Consent for Participation as a Subject in: Turning Around Schools: A View From the Stakeholders: A study that examines how stakeholder sense-making of turnaround policy influences the planning and implementation of turnaround goals.

Investigators: Jamie B. Chisum, Anna Carollo Cross, Jill Geiser, and Charles Grandson. PSAP Ed.D. Class of 2014

### **Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of the process stakeholders in turnaround LEA's go through to make sense of how to implement turnaround policies. You are being asked to participate because you have a role in the LEA that is directly involved in the implementation of LEA policies in a turnaround LEA. Please read this and feel free to ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a participant in the study.

**Type of Consent:** Adult Consent

### **Purpose of study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how stakeholders (school board members, central office personnel, principals and teachers) in turnaround LEA's understand and make sense of their roles in the implementation of turnaround policies.

The total number of participants in the study is expected to be 10-20.

Members of the research team do not have any financial interest in the study.

### **Description of the Study Procedures**

If you agree to be a participant in this study, you will be agreeing to participate in a 1-1 ½ hour on site in-person interview or in a location that is mutually agreeable. In addition, if you choose to do so, you will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript for accuracy; it is estimated that this will take approximately ½ hour.

### **Risks/Discomforts, Benefits of Being in the Study**

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks to participation. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in the study. However, the findings may be useful to LEA personnel, school

board members, and members of the State Departments of Education responsible for communicating or implementing turnaround policies. Understanding the factors that influence the implementation of turnaround policies may raise awareness about how different stakeholders view their roles in the process. You have been selected to participate in this study as an implementer of turnaround policy.

### **Payments/Costs/Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. There are no payments to you, nor costs to you to participate in the study.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If any published reports are produced as a result of this study, researchers will make every effort to omit or disguise information that may be used to directly identify a participant. All researchers will keep electronic information in a password protected computer file. Audio tape recordings will be held by the individual interviewer until a transcription has been completed and confirmed for accuracy. Those interview recordings will then be destroyed.

Access to the records will be limited to the researchers; however, please be aware that the Institutional Review Board and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.

### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University. You are free to withdraw at any time for whatever reason. There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for stopping your participation. If any significant findings emerge during the course of the research study that may affect your continued participation you will be notified immediately and the decision to withdraw or continue will be yours. In addition, you may refuse to answer individual questions but continue with participation in the study at any point during the interview process.

### **Dismissal From the Study**

The investigator(s) may withdraw you from the study at any time for the following reasons: (1) withdrawal is in your best interests, (2) you have failed to comply with the study requirements, or (3) the study is terminated.

### **Contacts and questions**

The researchers conducting this study are current doctoral students in the PSAP Ed.D program at Boston College: Jamie Chisum, Anna Carollo Cross, Jill Geiser, Charles Grandson

For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact a member of the research team:

Anna Carollo Cross (508) 875-7851 [anna.cross@bc.edu](mailto:anna.cross@bc.edu)

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or [irb@bc.edu](mailto:irb@bc.edu)

### **Copy of Consent Form**

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

### **Signatures/Dates**

Study Participant (Print Name) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

We will be interviewing policy implementers in our single case study LEA. We will focus on our stakeholder groups (Teachers, Principals, Central Office Administrators, School board Members).

The interview process will begin by having the interviewer go over the consent form and give a brief biography of him or herself in order to disclose any areas of potential biases.

### Background Questions:

1. How long have you been in the LEA? (member of the community)
2. How long have you been at this school? (serving as a school board, central office)
3. How long have you been in your current role?
4. What is your role?

### Sense-making

5. What was going through your mind when you first learned that the school/LEA was designated Level D?

Probe: Did you see any specific concerns or advantages?

6. Did you know it was a possibility? Why?
7. What does the “turnaround plan”(redesign) mean to you?

Probe: Why do you think that? Where did you get that from?

How did you find out about the turnaround plan or planning process?

8. What do you think the LEA is being asked to do to implement the turnaround plan?

Probe: What steps has the LEA taken to implement the turnaround plan?

To implement the turnaround plan what have the principal/teachers/school board members/superintendent done?

9. Who do you think is responsible for communicating the requirements of the turnaround plan to you?

Probe: Who actually has communicated it to you?

10. Who do you talk to when you have questions about school turnaround?

Probe: Where do those conversations take place?

Are there any other places you get information?

Do people share common understandings about the plan?

How does that make you feel?

11. Did you have conversations with colleagues about data before the designation?

Probe (if yes): Can you describe those conversations? What did you talk about?

How did you talk about it?

12. What is the school/organization turnaround philosophy?

Probe: what does that mean?

### Policy Implementation

13. Who do you think is responsible for understanding the turnaround plan?

Probe: How does that understanding look for teachers, principals, central office and school board?

14. What is your role in the turnaround process? Is this role different now than it was before your school became a turnaround school?

Probe: If new to the school or new to the role adjust the question.

15. Has your thinking about your role changed since pre-designation?

16. What changes have you observed since the LEA/school was designated a level D school?

Probe: Changes in teachers, leadership, community, staff, culture?

How would describe the leadership strategy here now and how that is different from before?

17. How have these changes affected you? (personally, behavior, professionally)

Probe: What changes have you seen in other people around you?

## Appendix E: Interview Guide

### Notes to Interviewer

This interview guide is meant to provide tips for effective interviewing based on the work of Seidman (2006). “Listening is the most important skill in interviewing. The hardest work for many interviewers is to keep quiet and to listen actively” (Seidman, 2006, p. 78).

Listen for:

- *substance*: pay attention to the details of what you are hearing to make sure it is as complete as you want it to be
- *inner voice*: probe for the thoughts or feelings that may be expressed under the words that are being spoken
- *process*: listen for substance but remain aware of time, nonverbal cues, pacing and participant fatigue
- Be flexible, ask questions in a different order or skip if the area has already been discussed.
- Focus on collecting data that answers the research questions
- Stay on topic
- Ask follow-up questions that enrich or clarify
- Explore topics if they will add to understanding
- Ask open ended questions, ask participants to “reconstruct” rather than to remember the situations exactly
- Trust your instincts
- Value silence for participant reflection and thoughtfulness
- Don’t rush
- Don’t answer questions for the interviewee.

## Appendix F: Interview Script

Thank you for participating in today's interviews.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am one of four Boston College Doctoral students working on a research study for our final dissertation.

I'd like to explain the study before we begin.

*We are researching the question of how individuals in turnaround LEA's make sense of the policies they are being asked to implement.*

At the end of this study we will be preparing a report that will be made available to you if you would like.

Would you like to receive a copy?

YES/NO

Your email? \_\_\_\_\_

We will be conducting interviews as a team. We will be interviewing principals, central office staff, teachers and school board members, approximately 30 individuals.

We will be asking 24 questions of all participants. It will take about 55-60 minutes.

The information you share with us today will be confidential. If we do use a quote in the report, it will not be attributed to any particular person. If there are any questions you would like to skip or you would like to stop the interview at any time please let us know. If you have any questions or concerns that you would like to share before we begin the interviews we can stop at this point. Any questions?

One of us will be taking notes during the interviews. We will also be taping the interview to make sure we can transcribe your words and comments as accurately as possible. Again we want to assure you that all your responses will be confidential. Shall we begin?

**Thank you. Let's begin with the first question**

**Appendix G: Observation Protocol**

Observational Field Notes

Setting:

Role of Observer

Time:

Length of Observation:

Description of Event/Object	Reflective Notes